

Zendou: Untold Truths

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Summary: 6 of 6. Zeno is forced to return to Sanghelios, where he learns of dark secrets, conspiracies and plots which compel him to return to his keep, likely to his doom... Epilogue and Commentary up. Please R & R.

1. Prologue

Authors Note: At last, the final story of the Zendou series. Though it is not really required to read the previous story arcs, it is recommended to read Duel Hearts at least, if you haven't. Also, this one will be posted once a week and will have a commentary covering the whole series at the end. This one is rated T due to swearing and violence. Enjoy!

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<p>Prologue

Zeno yawned and stretched, unsure if he wanted to get up yet. Beside him, he could feel his mate beginning to stir as well. No, not mate: spouse, he reminded himself with a smile. Two months they have been married, and he still hadn't gotten used to using the human word.

Just as well, as they both knew that if the High Council found out about this they would flip. That was why they hardly told anyone about the wedding: it was a very private affair between just them and the judge that did the service. Though, Luke still found out. Damn, sneaky ONI bastards, he recalled with a chuckle.

He knew it was only a matter of time before the news reached the High Council anyway, though they were doing their best to keep it a secret. For instance, Sani only wore the 'engagement' pendant when they were at home. Granted, the pendant wasn't really needed anymore since they had got matching tattoos about a week ago.

Zeno looked down at his right forearm and marveled at the simple, yet elegant tattoo that now resided there. Two loops made up of two intertwining lines in a pattern that meant 'infinity' according to the humans: these lines also encircled the wrist in a third loop. The only difference between them was that Zeno's was black and Sani's was a lighter, red-brown to compliment his skin tone. Both had healed well, though now they were in the most irritating part of the healing process: the itching phase. Zeno, having had previous experience with tattoos, had been able to resist scratching so far. Sani, on the other hand, was having difficulties.

"Sani, do not scratch," Zeno said softly when he caught his mate doing just that.

"Ugh," Sani grumbled as he forced himself to stop. "It itches so muchâ€¦".

"I know, sweet," Zeno said as he scooted over so he was behind him. "Perhaps some cream will help?"

Sani purred gratefully as Zeno took said cream and gently rubbed it onto the healing area. He returned the favor when Zeno was done, only he ended up doing more than just applying cream. It didn't take long for the foreplay to end up into a full on mating session.

"You knowâ€¦," Zeno said as they recovered from the romp. "It is a good thing we only have one real thing to deal with today."

"Ah yes, that new arrival," Sani said sleepily. "When does he arrive again?"

"Uhâ€¦". Zeno craned his neck to look at the time. "We have a couple of hours still."

"Oh, well thenâ€¦how about another round before we go?" There was a cheeky expression on Sani's face.

"Since when were you a sex addict?"

"I am not a sex addictâ€¦," Sani countered. "I am a Zeno addict!"

"Ah, well I cannot argue with that."

* * *

><p>A couple hours laterâ€¦

Zeno had to admit that he knew little about the Sangheili that was arriving today. Taho 'Eligo was his name, a shipmaster that had served honorably and with distinction during the Schism. Why he was being transferred here and not being promoted to fleet master, he did not know. That he was not informed on what duties this man would be doing bothered him. Not even Sesai, the station AI, had been

informed, which made the whole thing stink even more.

His mind kept going back to the hearing a few months back, on how the High Council said they would continue the debate on whether he was still worthy of his position privately. He had heard nothing since then and his instincts were nearly screaming that they had to be up to no good. The thing was what could he do about it? He had suspected they were wanting to remove him from his office long before the hearing took place.

Nothing, he told himself. _I can do nothing but just accept it, no matter how much it pisses me off. _There was one good thing though, should his suspicions come to pass: Sani had his separation paperwork filled out and waiting to go just in case. If Zeno did lose his position, Sani will be able to go with him back to Sanghelios.

Ambassador, the station AI, Sesai, said in his earpiece. _"The phantom from the ship __**Guiding Light **__is approaching._-

"Noted," Zeno said. "Any word on what this guy is going to be doing here yet?"

Negative, Ambassador. I am still trying to get that information.-

"I see. Thank you, Sesai."

"I really hope this is a case of poor communication and not something deliberate," Sani grumbled.

"Same here, love," Zeno sighed as he spied the approaching phantom. After a few moments, the phantom docked and a lone Sangheili dropped down from the grav-lift. "Shipmaster Tago 'Eligo," Zeno greeted him, extending his hand. "Welcome to Cairo Station. How was your journey?"

Tago looked down at his extended hand and brushed it aside. "Well enough," Tago said, not sounding impressed. Zeno did not miss that Tago did not refer to him as 'Ambassador' and he was already getting a bad vibe from this man. Still, that was no reason to not be polite.

"Forgive me, Tago, but no one on the station was informed, including our AI, on what you will be doing here, so it was difficult to arrange for appropriate accommodations. Do you know what your job here will be?"

"Yours."

Zeno blinked couple of times in confusion, not sure if he heard that right. "Say again? I think I heard you say you were taking _my_ position?"

"That is correct: I am your replacement." There was no hint of mischievousness in Tago's eyes, only seriousness.

Zeno's blood started to rise, despite having suspected this very thing was going to happen. "Why was I not informed of this sooner?"

Does the High Councilâ€¦."

"The High Council authorized the transition," Taho said flatly. "Your AI should be getting confirmation at this moment."

"That is an affirmative, Ambassador." Sesai said regretfully, from a nearby console this time. "The message states that Talo 'Eligo is to take over your duties immediately and that you are to depart the station within twenty-four hours."

"Twenty-fourâ€¦hoursâ€¦," Zeno said slowly, the shock setting in. "That is not even time to give you any trainingâ€¦adviceâ€¦a tour..."

"The Council specifically did not want you to train me," Taho said. "They told me they wanted a real Sangheili in this position, not one that had been 'humanized' and practiced deviant behavior."

Shock was now rage. "Deviant behavior!" Zeno roared. "Those fucking assholes should be more concerned about how I do my duties, not who I sleep with! And how wonderful they have no spine to tell me this themselves and instead slip this in like a bunch of blackmailing pirates!"

"Zeno!" Sani warned, grabbing his hand. "Calm downâ€¦getting into a rage will not help you here."

"Does it matter, Sani?" Zeno growled softly. "The council's mind is obviously already made up."

"As for training," Taho continued, having completely ignored Zeno's outburst. "They said your current aide should suffice in this task."

Now it was Sani's turn to get angry. "What? Hell no! Where Zeno goes I go: I will not be separated from my mate. Find your own damn aide! I quit!"

Taho frowned, clearly disappointed. "You cannot just quit, boyâ€¦."

"Watch me. We both had a feeling the Council was going to try to pull a stunt like this, so I have had a request to be relieved from military duty waiting to be sent out just in caseâ€¦and it will be sent the moment we return to our suite."

"And you think they would approve of such a request?" Taho sneered.

"I was drafted at the start of the Schism: I would not be in the military otherwise," Sani pointed out with a growl of his own. "Besides, we have more personnel than space to put them in right now."

"A good pointâ€¦."

"And just where are we to go on such short notice?" Zeno asked, his blood still hot.

"The ship I arrived on has been tasked with your return to

Sanghelios, where the Council hopes you will be reminded on how to be a proper Sangheiliâ€|though it seems chances of that will be less if yourâ€|mateâ€|is coming along. There, you will await your new assignment, should you be deemed worthy of one."

It was so hard not to deck the bastard right then and there.

* * *

><p>A few hours laterâ€|

Zeno paced the living room, nearly bumping into the movers that were packing his things more than once. He knew he should be helping pack, but he was just too angry: he was more likely to throw things than to pack them right now. _Oh the council really sent a winner didn't they? _he thought with a faint growl. _Someone that fits their collective persona just perfectly. _

The bastard hadn't even allowed him to introduce him to the officials he would be working with, saying he wanted to be as free from his 'taint' as possible. Considering the man's attitude toward him, Zeno would not be surprised at all if he insisted on the suite being completely sterilized before moving in. At least Sani's separation paperwork was approved without a hitch.

"Zeno, calm down," he heard his mate say: Zeno had lost count of how many times Sani said that today already. "There is nothing we can do, so there is no point in being angry."

"I know," Zeno grumbled, trying not to take his frustrations out on Sani. "But where are we to go? What will we _do_? Rtas already told me it may be some time before he has need of me. Plus, I know my keep would not want us and the apartment I have in the capital would be too small for us."

"My keep will accept us," Sani said. "After what you have done for me, they consider you family."

"Family? Really?"

Sani chuckled. "They do not forget those that go out of their way to help us, Zeno."

Zeno stopped pacing as he considered it. Yes, he would be staying with people that were not only are grateful for helping Sani, but were far more open-minded than most of their species. Things might not be as bad as he thought. Then he remembered one little possible crimp in the planâ€|.

"Waitâ€|doesn't get rather cold there during winter?" he asked.

"Yes," Sani confirmed. "But not much colder than the cabin on Earth we stayed at sometimes."

"What season will it be when we arrive?"

"Ahâ€|Fall."

"Oh greatâ€|I will be freezing my ass off there almost

immediatelyâ€|. "

"Do not worry; I will help keep that lovely ass of yours warm."

Zeno chuckled at that. His mood brightened, Zeno started thinking about how to get back at Tago before he left. While he really wanted to do something to the council, he knew it would be signing a death warrant on his ass if he tried it, so Tago had to do. "Sesai," he asked. "Has Tago made any _arrangements_ to fix up the suite once I am gone?"

"Affirmative, Zeno," the draconic AI said from the console. "He has requested a full clean up of the suite, to include new carpet and furniture and fresh paint."

Zeno smiled broadly: this would be perfect. "Did he specify what kind of paint and furniture?"

"Negative, Zeno. In fact, I believe he said he didn't care."

"Goodâ€|I have some _suggestions_ to make for our dear new ambassador."

It pleased him to see an equally broad grin on Sesai's face. "What are your _suggestions_, Zeno?" she asked.

In a very good mood now, Zeno stated his _suggestions_. He hadn't played a prank in a long time, so why not go out with a bang? _I wonder if dear Tago likes pink?_

2. Unwelcome Guest

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><p>Chapter 1: Unwanted Guest

The cold wind gave one last nip at Zeno's feet as he returned home, grateful to be out of the chilly Sanghelios winter air. The first thing he did was to ensure the heating system was online before stripping off his winter clothing and then diving under the covers of the bed. Zeno intended to stay there until he warmed up a bit, which shouldn't take too long, though it would take even less time if Sani was home as well, _helping_ him warm up.

He honestly still had difficulty seeing how _any_ Sangheili could live in such conditions: visiting was one thing, but _living_ here? It made him a bit jealous at how easily his mate acclimatized himself once more to this environment: he was already walking around as if he didn't even _feel_ the cold. _I__cannot__really__complain,__ he reminded himself.
_The__folks__here__are__pleasant__and__hospitable._

Zeno thought back to a few months ago, when he was essentially kicked off of the Cairo by Tago, the new ambassador. A smile creased Zeno's face when he recalled Tago's reaction to the modifications to the ambassador suite. Sesai had been kind enough to record the reaction and send him a copy: the shock and rage on Tago's face was enough to brighten any dull day he had. Nope, __Tago__ is __definitely__ not __a__ pink __person__, Zeno thought, snickering. He especially loved Sesai's comment when Tago demanded to know why his new home was all pink: real men wear pink. It sent him into giggle fits every time he heard it.

Even better, the humans on the station seemed to get on the act: Luke likely had something to do with that. It turned out many officials hated the extreme short notice on the change of ambassador, not to mention Tago's arrogant attitude, and were making life for him a bit annoying, if not difficult. Zeno just hoped they didn't push things too far: the last thing they needed was for Tago to cause a diplomatic incident in a fit of rage.

The whole thing still annoyed Zeno, however. The High Council were calling him too 'humanized' and 'unSangheili', yet they go and pull a stunt like that? That was something a San'Shyuum or a Kig-Yar would do, not a Sangheili! Hypocrits, __the__ lot __of__ them, he grumbled. Zeno had to wonder if the Arbiter even knew what his fellow councilors were doing. Still, there were some positive things out of this.

For one thing, on the way to Sanghelios, Sani got to see an old squadmate again: a major named Tegs 'Vatem. He found out that Tegs was now married and had little ones on the way and Tegs seemed happy that Sani was in a better situation himself. Also, Sani didn't have to worry about military duty anymore, which he never wanted in the first place. Zeno had noticed immediately how much happier Sani was when they arrived at the Hilvum keep and the other Hilvum were very glad to see him too. When Sani introduced him to his kin, they called him an 'honorary Hilvum'. Not only for helping Sani out, but due to his relationship with him. Zeno had to admit the reception was a bit overwhelming, even if he had been expecting it.

After they had settled in, Sani returned to work as a herder in the Ses, while Zeno opted to help out the Tal: mainly because he wanted a bit more action than what he had before. After his first day on patrol, he realized just how out of shape he was, though now, a few months later, he was able to keep up with the patrol squad without difficulty. At least, so long as the weather cooperated, which was the one thing Zeno didn't like about this keep. It was just too damn cold right now for any reasonable Sangheili to be out and about.

"Hiding under the covers again, love?" Sani's voice said, breaking his train of thought.

"Just from the cold, sweet," Zeno said, poking his head out from under the covers.

"Oh, it is not that cold, Zeno," Sani said teasingly as he stripped himself of his own winter clothing.

"Uh huh, you say that almost every single day," Zeno retorted, then

with a smile added. "How about helping me warm up?"

"And you say that almost every day," Sani giggled as he slipped under the covers with him. The pair engaged in a bit of foreplay, cuddling and stroking each other, but before they could go any further there was a knock on their door. "Oh, who could that be?" Sani moaned as he slipped out of the bed and put on a robe, leaving Zeno disappointed.

From the warmth of the bed, Zeno watched Sani approach the door, ready to spring to his aid should he need it. He didn't know why he bothered, as no one he knew of was a threat here. The only one he knew of that may go after them is Runi, whom last he heard, was under some type of exile. Zeno relaxed when he saw it was Sani's sister, Yura, at the door. A tough gal, he discovered, whom could scrap among the most skilled of guys.

"Yura," Sani said with a smile as he let her in. "Good to see you."

"And you, brother," Yura said.

"Closeâ€|theâ€|doorâ€|.," Zeno chattered as a wave of cold air hit his face.

"Feh, still not used to this?" Yura teased as Sani closed the door. "You will not get used to the cold if you stay huddled up under there." With a smirk, she stalked toward him.

Zeno's eyes widened. "No, no! I am not decent!" he squealed as he tried to cling to the covers. It was to no avail though, as Yura easily ripped them off him. "Yikes!" Zeno dove for his own robe and quickly pulled it on.

"I must say, brother, you do have good taste in men," Yura said with a giggle.

"Now, now, sis, I do not think Daka would like you eyeing my mate," Sani teased.

"Oh he is used to it, considering I am surrounded by good looking men everyday in the Tal."

"Yeah, I suppose he is."

"Soâ€|," Zeno said as he straightened out his robe. "Here just to socialize or have something important?"

"Aw did I interrupt something?" Yura had a knowing grin on her face, prompting a blush from them both.

"Somewhat, yesâ€|," Sani admitted. "You caught us before we got moreâ€|involved."

"Well, I apologize, but unfortunately what I have to tell you will dampen your mood."

"Ughâ€|can it wait until tomorrow?" Zeno grumbled.

"Then it would be too late to give you sufficient

warning."

"Waitâ€|you meanâ€|," Sani said, his eyes wide.

"I am afraid so, brother. I just received word that Koni is returning home on shore leave tomorrow."

"Ughâ€|.," Sani groaned, looking distressed.

Zeno looked between them, confused by the negative reaction. "I must be missing something hereâ€|," he said.

"Sorry, Zeno," Sani said with a sigh. "Koni 'Hilvumai, he is one of our elder brothers."

"Hilvum..aiâ€|a swordsman?"

"Aye, and he was heavily influenced by _traditional_ Sangheili in war college and after, so he is more akin to a Sangheili from a traditional keep than a Hilvum."

"Plus he has it in for Sani," Yura added.

That really got his attention. "Why?" Zeno said, his eyes narrowing.

Sani and Yura looked at each other before Sani said with a sigh. "Of our line, I am the first in several generations that chose not to go into the _Tal._ Thus he harasses and heckles me every chance he gets."

"I see," Zeno said, starting to understand. "He thinks you are going against 'tradition' and wants to 'straighten' you out."

"It is worse," Sani said, his fist clenching. "He also dislikes the fact I am a _sebo_ and I am certain when he finds out I am paired with another male he will go ballistic."

"Pfft, let him," Zeno growled faintly. "You can do what you want to do, as it is your life, not his. If he wants to get in your face about it, he will have to go through me first."

"He is a swordsmanâ€|Zenoâ€|."

"So? Swordsman or not, you are my mate and I will protect my mate no matter who it is that threatens you."

"You are overreacting," Yura said. "Koni may not like Sani's life choices, but he has never actually threatened to physically harm him."

"If he gets desperate enough to 'fix' Sani, he may very well do something drastic," Zeno pointed out. "Desperate people do drastic things, Sani and I _both_ know that."

"Regardless, you will not have to deal with him alone: much of the keep is getting sick of his attitude. If pushed enough, the council may force him to work in another _sora_."

"They can do that?" Zeno asked, raising a brow.

"It is the first option in deal with individuals that get tooâ€|snootyâ€|in the caste they chose," Sani explained. "Usually by forcing them to work in the _sora_ they looked down upon the most."

"Heh," Zeno said with a smirk. "I just got a lovely mental image of Koni trying and failing hard at herding an ut'su herdâ€|."

"The herdmaster would have a field day with him, that is for sure," Sani agreed.

* * *

><p>The next dayâ€|

Sani headed home after a long shift out in the fields, eager to get back home before his brother showed up. Despite Zeno and Yura's reassurances, he still would rather not have to deal with Koni at all. He knew, however, that avoiding him completely would be next to impossible, but if he could avoid seeing him as much as possible, it would make his days a lot less stressful.

"There you are, brother," Koni's voice said, shattering Sani's hopes. "_Hard_ day in the fields?" His brother's tone was mocking.

"Yes, in fact," Sani replied stiffly. "A _ka__'__ur_ was stalking the herd pens, so the ut'su were a bit testy."

"A _ka__'__ur_? Pleaseâ€|that is nothing," Koni said dismissively. "Now if you had said _bandits_ were attempting to raid the herdâ€|."

"There has not been a bandit raid on our herds in years, Koni," Sani growled. "And at this time of year it is extremely unlikely any bandit would attempt it anyway. Now leave me alone."

"I think not, brother. I have much to discuss with you."

"You always doâ€|," Sani grumbled as he picked up the pace. Unfortunately, Koni kept pace with him easily.

"I heard you have left the military," Koni said, a disapproving tone in his voice. "A shame: the one time you could have proved to be of any real worth and you threw it away."

"A Sangheili's worth does not rest solely on fighting skill alone, Koni," Sani growled, wondering why he even bothered arguing. "_Especially_ in this keep."

"Fah, this keep is _weak_ compared to others."

"If we were so weak, we would have been taken over a long time ago." A faint smile creased Sani's face as he added. "Or perhaps the other keeps are too _weak_ because they cannot stand the cold."

"That is not funny, Sani."

"Like you have a sense of humor to begin with."

Koni snarled and went silent, but after a moment he spoke again. "So how is your dear friend Runi? I am surprised he did not return with you."

Sani stiffed a bit at the sound of his name. "That bastard no longer has a name and has been exiled due to a number of crimes," Sani said, venom in his voice.

"Really? A pityâ€¦from the sound of things he was doing things _right._" The tone of his voice told Sani that Koni seemed to know more about the situation than he let on. The implications of his statement made Sani angry.

"Right? _Right!_" Sani turned on him. "You think it is right for someone to attempt to turn me into a slave? A situation our _ancestors_ fought against at the dawn of the Covenant? I was not about to allow him to do so and that cowardly murderer got what he deserved!"

His fervor caught Koni by surprise: the elder male actually backing up a few paces, his hands up defensively. "Well now, good to see there is some actual _fire_ in your veins, brother," he said, completely ignoring the context of Sani's words.

Sani just growled at him, turned back around and started on his way. Koni, however, was not done yet.

"By the way, brother," Koni said, easily catching up to him. "I have also heard you have taken a mate."

Sani's eyes widened as he suspected what he was going to say next. "I have: what of it?" he replied.

Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Koni lick a mandible, a gleam of lust in his eyes. "I would like to meet her," he said. "Perhaps exercise my right to breed with any female: I am certain she would appreciate a real Sangheili breeding herâ€¦".

At first Sani felt anger, but then he realized something: Koni didn't know his mate was _male._ A small smile creased his mandibles when saw an opportunity to have some fun with Koni and he knew Zeno would certainly be willing to play this kind of trick on him. There was no time to coordinate this though, as his home was just ahead and he doubted Koni would allow him to 'speak' to his mate first before forcing himself into the home. He could only hope Zeno picked up on cuesâ€¦.

"I disapprove," Sani said, giving Koni his best glare. "But it is not like I will be able to stop you is it?"

"Certainly not," Koni confirmed a broad grin on his face. "At least you remember such protocols."

"Yesâ€¦indeed."

* * *

><p>Zeno was already home, curled up under the covers again warming up, when he heard the door open. Before he could call out a greeting though, he heard Sani shout out rather loudly. "Honey, I am home! And

I have someone with me that wants to see you!"<p>

Why did he shout? Zeno thought.

He knows I am usually in the bed. Then he recalled what Yura warned them about yesterday and the next voice he heard confirmed it.

"Where is she, brother?" a new voice said, definitely male. That had to be Koni. "Is she at home?"

"My mate usually does beat me home every day," Sani said. "Probably under the covers of the bed, warming up, like always."

"Why is that?"

"Not native to this area, so is not used to the cold."

"What keep?"

"Ribal."

"Mmmmâ€|.", Koni had a lustful tone in his voice. "I have heard they had very lovely females. How did a weakling like you ever manage to win one over?"

There was an annoyed snort. "I have my own charms."

Yes, you do indeed, Zeno thought with a grin. It didn't escape his notice either that Sani was not using any pronouns in his speech when referring to him. Zeno smelled a prank and who was he to not play along? He stretched himself out on the bed, hoping the blankets obscured his profile enough so it wouldn't give away his true gender.

"Whatever, time to work my own charms," he heard Koni say, along with the steady beats of approaching footfalls. "Come on out dearest, there is no need to be shy."

"Not so much shy as likes to play hard to get," Sani said.

"Ah, someone that likes to play games eh?" Zeno could feel the bed shift as Koni climbed in. "I like games tooâ€|Mmmâ€|it is turning out that you may be just my typeâ€|."

The covers over his head were pulled away, revealing Koni's face. "I am flattered," Zeno said smugly. "But I am afraid you are not my type at all."

Koni's face went from seductive to disgust in less than a second. He practically flew off the bed as he screamed in shock. "Whaâ€|what is this!" he demanded as Zeno rose from the bed himself, not caring about his nudity.

"This is my mate, Zeno 'Ribal," Sani said calmly as he wandered over to Zeno's side.

"Aâ€|a male!"

"Why so shocked, Koni?" Zeno said as he wrapped an arm around Sani. "From what I have heard, you knew Sani was a _sebo_: it is not his fault you _assumed_ I was female."

"Saniâ€¦what were you thinking!" Koni demanded. "You cannot continue your bloodline with him!"

"From how you kept ragging on me about how I am not worthy, I am surprised you care if I continued my bloodline at all," Sani pointed out.

"I was trying to help you!"

"_Help_ me?" Sani snorted. "Where have I heard _that_ before? I do not _want_ your help, Koni. I never did. My life is my own to live, not yours."

"You are making a mistakeâ€¦".

"If thisâ€¦". Sani dragged a claw lightly down Zeno's chest, making him shiver. "Is a mistake, than I am glad I made it."

Koni stared at them dumbfounded, then with a growl stormed out of the house, slamming the door behind him. Zeno and Sani looked at the door for a moment, then at each other before finally bursting out in laughter.

3. The Duel

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<p>Chapter 2: The Duel

The next few days were uneventful: Koni having not shown his face since he stormed out, much to Sani's relief. It was starting to look like Koni had actually gotten the hint to leave Sani be, however, one day, he showed his face again. This time though, at the main training hall of the _Tal_, where Zeno was assisting in training some new members.

"You!" Koni growled as he stormed onto the training floor.

"I _do_ have a name, Koni," Zeno replied, looking up at him, slightly annoyed. It was obvious Koni was up to something, as he was in his full zealot armor.

"I challenge you! Here and now!"

Zeno raised an eye ridge and tilted this head. "For what?" Around him the hall had gone deathly quiet.

"To free my brother from your corrupting influence!"

"Corrupting? Please. I never forced Sani to do anything: everything he has done was of his own free will, including falling in love with me."

"Hardly free will when you can twist words like you can," Koni growled. "I know you were the former ambassadorâ€¦a bureaucrat! All bureaucrats have tongues like a San'Shyuum! It is no wonder my poor, naïve brother fell under your spell so easily."

"And you think defeating me in combat will get him to 'change his mind'?"

"Wellâ€¦it is hard for you to continue to influence him if you are dead." There was a malicious grin on Koni's face.

There were a few mummers of disapproval from the other _Tal_. "There will be no bloodshed over what is essentially a grudge match," the training master said. "If you wish to duel another member of the _Tal_, it must be a non-lethal match, like it is during our annual contests."

Koni grinded his mandibles together in obvious frustration. "Fine then! When I win, you are to break off contact with Sani completely!" he growled.

"_When_ you win? You are awfully over-confident," Zeno said calmly. "What makes you think I do not have the skill to kick your arrogant ass?"

Koni actually laughed. "Please! I am a swordsman! I am one of the best!"

Zeno stood tall and studied Koni carefully: specifically looking at his weaponry. He only saw one sword and it looked to be the standard type: neither gauntlet had the obvious modifications of bearing a plasma shield either. What were the chances of Koni having experience fighting a duel wielder? Or one that used kisans for that matter? He estimated the chances were pretty low, which in turn meant his own chances of winning were most likely in his favor. The only thing was though, he had yet to win a duel at all: a track record that didn't look kindly upon him. Granted, those particular duels he fought when he was angry and not thinking clearly.

Around him the other Sangheili were all looking at him, waiting to see what his answer would be. Unlike members from other keeps, he suspected the Hilvums would not look down upon him for refusing an essentially idiotic challenge. Koni on the other hand, would likely never let him or Sani live it down if he refused.

"Well now," Zeno said, choosing his words carefully. "You really want that ego boost eh? Very well, but on a few conditions."

"State them," Koni hissed, obviously impatient.

"One: we fight using the weapons and styles we are most comfortable with."

"That is a given, you moron."

Zeno ignored the insult. "Two: you allow me the chance to get more properly dressed and equipped."

"Whatever for?"

"Well, for one thing, you are in full military grade combat armor, while Iâ€|not to offend the craftsmanship of the Chi_â€|am in non-military grade armor. Would not exactly be fair now would it?"

"He is right," the training master said. "Both combatants must be as equal as possible for a duel to ensure a fair match."

"Fineâ€|," Koni growled, clearly unhappy. "Is there anything else you wish to impose upon this?"

"Only one more thing." Zeno stepped right up to his face, and said in a low voice, but not so low that no one else could hear. "If I win, you cease harassing Sani about his life choices. Cease harassing both of us for that matter. In fact, if you break that, you are to relinquish your sword."

Koni was clearly surprised by this. "You cannot make such a demand!" he said.

"You are asking me to leave and cease contact with someone that means the world to me should you win," Zeno growled. "It is only fair that you give up something just as precious in return if I won."

"The demand is sound," the training master said.

"Fine!" Koni hissed. "Not like it will matter as I will win anyway! Go, make your preparations quickly! The sooner this is over with, the better!"

* * *

><p>Sani walked briskly toward the Tal training hall. Just what was Zeno thinking! he thought, his hearts hammering with worry. Yura had approached him a few moments ago and told him about Koni challenging Zeno to a duel, which Zeno had accepted. While he liked the conditions Zeno put on the duel and he knew Zeno was good with the sword, he wasn't certain Zeno would be able to win against a swordsman like Koni.

He entered the training hall to see a crowd already gathered around the sparring ring. In the ring was Koni, pacing back and forth like a caged ka'ur. "Where is he!" his brother was growling. "He has had more than enough time!"

Where 'is' Zeno? Sani thought, agreeing with him. He hadn't thought to go back home first as he felt he didn't have the time. Now he wondered if he should have.

"Sani, it appears your so-called 'mate' is a coward," Koni snarled when he saw him. "I will not let either of you live it down either!"

"Actually, I have been here for several minutes," Zeno's voice said. "Watching you fume like a boiling kettle on a stove." Heads turned to

see Zeno materialize just outside the ring, in his full Sub-commander SpecOps armor.

"Specâ€¦Opsâ€¦." For the first time, Koni didn't seem so sure of himself.

"What is the matter, Koni?" Zeno said as he stepped into the ring. "Do not tell me you are going to run away nowâ€¦."

"Of course not!" Koni barked.

"Weapons please, for safety checks," the training master said.

"Certainly," Zeno said, taking both sword hilts off his hips and handing them to him: he noticed Koni's eyes widen in surprise from seeing two swords. "I have already adjusted them to training power output."

The training master inspected them and nodded before handing them back. "Verified. Koni?"

Koni seemed reluctant to hand over his sword, but eventually did so. The training master made the necessary adjustments before handing it back to him. "Alright, this is a free form duel," the training master said. "Punches, kicks and headbutts are allowed, but biting and choke holds are not. Points will be gained by draining your opponents shield completely, at which time each combatant will be required to go to opposite sides of the ring to allow for full shield recharge. Not heeding this will be ground for immediate forfeiting of the match. The match is over when one combatant achieves five points. Do you understand the rules of the match?"

"Yes, training master," Zeno said, while Koni just growled.

"Very well, you may begin."

* * *

><p>Zeno ignited his swords, but did not make a move otherwise, preferring Koni to make the first move. Koni had ignited his own sword, but looked confused. "What kind of swords are those?" he asked.

"Really now, you know about how 'lovely' my keeps females are, but do not know about our traditional blade, the kisan?" Zeno mocked. "I can see where your prioritie_s_ really lieâ€¦." There were a few chuckles from the audience: this only aided in infuriating Koni.

Koni roared at him and charged with his sword back and ready to swing. Zeno crouched and then leapt over the charging Sangheili, somersaulting once, then twisting around so he was facing his opponent. Before Koni could fully comprehend what happened, Zeno swung his own blades, striking him twice in the back. Koni's shields visibly flared before 'popping'.

"First point goes to Zeno," the training master announced, as Zeno, per the rules, quickly backpedaled to the opposite side of the ring.

"Lucky strike!" Koni growled as his shields recharged. "But remember, it is the last blow that really counts!"

"A fact I know all too well, Koni," Zeno said. "Care to try again?"

"I would not be so cocky if I were you, _boy_!"

* * *

><p>Sani continued to watch from the sidelines, feeling helpless. Though this was not a match to the death, the consequences if Zeno lost was far worse. Worse, whatever luck Zeno had at first seemed to disappear as in rapid session, Zeno lost his shields not once, nor twice, but three times in a row. It was like Zeno had suddenly forgotten how to fight. "Zeno!" he called out reflexively. "What are you doing! I know you fight better than this!" Zeno glanced his way, but Sani could not tell his expression due to the full helmet he wore.<p>

"A good question, Zeno," Koni said mockingly. "What is wrong? SpecOps only teach the basics? This fight is getting boringâ€|"

"Do not worry, Sani," Zeno said, then he added in the human tongue: "Things are not always what they seem."

Sani blinked, then nodded, reassured. Koni on the other hand, obvious did not have his translation software active. "What was that?" he growled. "Bah, no matter, two more points and I win. This should be quickâ€|."

"Yesâ€|it shouldâ€|," Zeno said, a hint of slyness in his voice.

Koni came at him again, but Zeno rolled neatly to one side and swept Koni's legs out from under him. He swung quickly, landing a shield popping blow before Koni could recover. "Another lucky blow!" Koni hissed as they waited for his shields to recharge.

Next round, Zeno went aggressive, keeping Koni busy trying to dodge and block blows from two swords. As Sani watched, he couldn't help but notice that Zeno seemed to be holding back, as if waiting for something specific. Then it happened: Koni parried a blow with a downward motion and Zeno countered with an elbow smash to his face. However, that elbow had a blade leading in front of it, resulting in Koni losing his shields once more.

"Bottom blade is not just for looks, ya know," Zeno said as he backed away from a shocked Koni. "Looks like we are tied up."

"Do not get too comfortableâ€|," Koni sneered. "I am going just getting startedâ€|."

"Ah, what a coincidenceâ€|so am Iâ€|." Once more they went head on, only this time Zeno was not holding back. Koni could not keep up with Zeno's whirling duel blades with his one and thus, quickly lost his shields once more. "Four to three, me," Zeno said cheerfully. "One more point to be free. Heyâ€|that rhymedâ€|."

"Oh Zenoâ€|," Sani muttered, shaking his head at Zeno's

silliness.

"It is not over yet!" Koni roared, coming at him again.

This round was short and intense, Koni giving it all he had. Zeno looked like was having difficulties, but then, quite suddenly, he managed to rip Koni's sword right out of his hand. This he followed with a round house kick, connected squarely with Koni's head. The impact not only popped his shields, but knocked his helmet off his head. The helmet bounced off the floor of the sparring circle and disappeared into the crowd, while Koni collapsed on the floor, stunned.

"Correction," Zeno said, his tone deathly serious. "It is over." In a couple of strides he was standing over Koni, one blade pointing at his head. "I won and so you are honor bound to hold your end of the agreement: you are to stop bothering Sani over his life choices and me. Should you break that agreement, you relinquish your sword."

Koni growled deeply at him. "Fine," he said. "But I will never stop believing you are a bad influence on him."

"You are free to believe that, as incorrect as it may be," Zeno said, raising his sword. "But keep in mind that you are pretty much alone in that belief in this keep."

"Whateverâ€¦".

* * *

><p>Zeno glared down at Koni for a moment longer before turning and deactivating his swords, placing them back on his hip as he did so. He removed his helmet as he started to walk out of sparring ring and glanced around to find Sani. His search though was interrupted by a cry of warning.<p>

"Look out!"

Zeno turned around and his eyes widened in horror and time seemed to slow down. Koni had retrieved his sword and was coming at him once more, the blade crackling at full power. There was no time to ignite his own swords again and with his helmet off, his shields were down, leaving him helpless. Worse, Koni was already too close to effectively dodge the blow, though Zeno started to do so anyway out of reflex.

There were two bright flashes and two bolts of plasma struck Koni in his sword hand. With a cry of agony, Koni dropped his sword, and what would have been impalement became a full body collision instead. Zeno and Koni tumbled across the sparring ring floor a bit, before Zeno was able to coordinate enough to throw the man off him and spring to his feet, reading himself for another attack. Fortunately, Koni was more concerned about his now ruined sword hand than anything else.

"My hand!" he whined as he clutched at the ruined appendage. "Who-who dares!"

"Me," Sani's voice said. Zeno turned to see his mate walk up beside

him, a plasma pistol in hand and still aimed at Koni.

"Wha-why!" Koni demanded. "I am onlyâ€|."

"Do not give me that Brute dung, Koni," Sani growled. "You lost the duel and any respectable and honorable Sangheili would have accepted it and walked away. What you just tried to do proves you are neither and it makes me ashamed to call you brother. In factâ€|you are no longer my brother. I disown you and deny you even existed as one from this point on!"

"I too, disown you," Yura said, joining them. "You bring a taint to our line we do not need, nor want."

"Yuraâ€|," Koni started to say, but she cut him off.

"Be gone from our sight!" Yura snapped. "And consider yourself lucky if you have any family relations left after what you tried to do this day!"

Koni looked like he was about to protest, but after looking around at the disapproving glares from other Sangheili he wisely kept his trap shut. He rose to his feet and without another word, sprinted out of the building and into the dimming light of the approaching night.

"Looks like he will be relinquishing his sword anyway," Zeno said as they watched him go. "Be a bit hard to use a sword with that hand now."

"Unless he learns how to use it in his other one," Sani muttered, the crowd in the room starting to disperse. "As stubborn as he is, that will likely be the case."

"So that means he is not an exile? Sure sounded like that was what you were doingâ€|."

"Nay, only the council has that authority," Yura explained. "And his crime was not nearly enough to warrant such judgment. However, he will be watched closely for now on."

"I see. By the way, please tell me your other brother is moreâ€|_reasonable_ than he was: I am not sure I can tolerate another case like Koni."

Sani chuckled a bit. "Do not worry, Hoko cares only about himself and cares not what I do, though that naturally is an issue in and of itselfâ€|."

"Well that is a reliefâ€|."

"Ohâ€|by the way, Zenoâ€|."

"Hmm?" Suddenly Sani slapped him, sending a shockwave of pain across his face. "Ow!" Zeno cried, rubbing his face. "What was that for, sweet?"

Sani had his hands on his hips and an angry look on his face. "That is for scaring me half-to-death with this stupid duel!" Sani snapped. "You did not even think to talk to me about this first!"

"I did not exactly have time to do so, loveâ€|," Zeno grumbled. "He came in wanting it immediately. Hell, it was fortunate I was able to convince him to let me change into this armor to stand a better chance."

"Still! What would you have done if you had lost! Did you even think about that!"

"I would have thought of something, do not worry. Besides, I won, so let us not worry about what might have been."

"Ughâ€|what am I going to do with you?"

"Love and treasure me?"

"Hmâ€|nah, I think a couple of days sleeping on the couch would be better."

"Whaaaaâ€|.?"

"Unlessâ€|you can catch me before I reach the house!" At that Sani took off running.

Zeno blinked and then took off after him. Behind them, Yura was laughing.

* * *

><p>A couple of days laterâ€|.

Desperate times called for desperate measures: that was what she kept telling herself anyway. She would have rather used a means of travel more befitting of someone of her status, but such methods would have been too risky at this time. So for the past couple of weeks she had been hitchhiking across Sanghelios, accepting whatever transport she could get: today it was a cargo transport ferrying spices. All in hopes she could deliver the message she carried close to her hearts.

"Ma'dam?" a male voice said, breaking into her thoughts.

"Yes?" she said as she looked up one of the serfs that were in charge of the cargo, instinctively bundling the cloak tighter around herself.

"We will be arriving at our destination in a few moments."

"Alright, thank youâ€|"

"Forgive me for being intrusive, ma'dam, but are you certain your attire will be sufficient for this climate?"

She looked down at herself and frowned. All she had underneath the light cloak was, essentially, a few sparse scraps of clothing designed to turn audience heads, not provide protection from the elements. "I had not the time to find proper clothing for this trip," she admitted with a sigh. Indeed, she had not even bothered to search for any on the many 'stops' along the way, too fearful of delaying the journey any more than necessary.

"What drove someone like you to flee from your home in such a rush?"

It was a question many that graciously gave her a ride had asked and she gave the same answer as always. "That is not for you to know," she said stiffly. "And if the people of this keep are as hospitable as I have been told, I should have no difficulty acquiring proper attire when we arrive."

The serf bowed his head respectfully. "I only desire to ensure someone of your status is comfortable, ma'dam, nothing more. It is not every day we have someone asking us for transport, let alone a Gi'veaâ€|."

"I appreciate the thought, though I would rather be alone right now."

"As you wish. I will inform you when we arrive." The serf bowed again and walked back to the front of the transport, where it was heated.

She sighed once more and tightened the cloak about herself even more. For the last few hours she could feel the cold seeping through the metal floor of the cargo hold. It was starting to sap her strength, along with the exhaustion, hunger and overall stress. _Please, __oh__please__be__there__â€|_, she thought. If she had missed him againâ€|.

It had been the story of her life. Staying in touch was pretty much impossible during the war, especially when the Great Schism started. It had been pure luck she ran into him on _High__Charity_, but he was taken away from her before she could even begin to tell him the secrets in her hearts. The only other time she had actually spoken with him was shortly after her escape from _High__Charity_, but he had suffered a great loss since then and it would not have been appropriate to burden him even more.

After that, it had been a game of hide and seek, one she kept losing. Either she was not allowed to or otherwise incapable of going where he was, or she kept just missing him. Now things were really dire, hence her rush to reach him before he disappeared on her once more. She doubted he would actually do anything about it, considering his own past, but at the very least, she would no longer bare this burden alone. And if he _wasn__'__t_ still here and this place was indeed as hospitable as she had been informed, perhaps she could use this place to finally rest a bit. The journey had been long and hard and her body was screaming for some proper rest.

There was a sudden jolt of the transport stopping, nearly throwing her off her seat. As she stood, the serf returned. "We have arrived, ma'dam," he said.

"Thank you," she said as the serf walked past her. He weaved through the various containers with ease before opening the main cargo hatch. At once, a gust of cold, winter air rushed in, stealing away her breath for a brief moment. "Ughâ€|," she gasped, taken by surprise, despite having expected it.

"Are you alright, ma'dam?" the serf asked.

"Iâ€¦I will be," she replied as she made her way to the cargo hatch.

"If you would like, you can sit in the cabin where it is warm while I find you another ride."

"This is my final destination, so that will not be necessary. Thank you, though, for the generous offer."

"My pleasure, ma'dam," the serf said as he helped her down. "I wish you luck."

She took a few paces away from the cargo transport and looked around. The area they stopped at had few buildings, though she could see more in the distance. Besides the serfs she rode in with and a few local serfs, there weren't many people around. She could understand why: her feet were already starting to feel like they were going to freeze off at any moment.

"Mmm, looks like they brought in a very _special_ spice today," a new voice said.

She turned and glared at a male that was approaching her. Polished gold armor gleamed in the sunlight, though any elegance he had was negated not only by heavily bandaged right hand, but also by the lustful grin on his face. _Ugh, __a__swordsman,_ she thought with a growl, able to tell what he was immediately by his attitude. Swordsman were the bane of Gi'vea like her.

"I am not here to look for a consort, zealot," she said flatly. "So you are wasting your time."

"Ah, but you came all this wayâ€¦and in a hurry too considering how you are shivering," the zealot pressed, getting closer, reaching out his good hand to her. "At least allow me to warm you up a bit before continuing whatever mission you are on."

With a hiss she grabbed his hand and twisted it, forcing him to bend over. She then kicked him in the gut and the back of the knee, before finally kicking him in the groin. Only then did she let go of his arm and he crumpled nicely onto the cold earth, curled up in a fetal position. "Filthy, arrogant, shaft-for-brains swordsmanâ€¦," she growled.

"I am sorry, miss," another Sangheili said, a guard this time. "Is he bothering you?"

"_Was, __"_ she corrected. "I do not think he will be so _eager_ to bother me again anytime soon. Please tell me there are not more of the likes of him hereâ€¦."

"Ah, I must apologize for Koni's behavior: one would think he would know better considering the trouble he is already in," the guard said, shaking his head. "Fortunately, he is the exception, not the rule, in this keep."

"That is a reliefâ€¦."

"Forgive me, miss, but it is not often we get visitors as passengers

via cargo transport: may I inquire as to your purpose here?"

At that she sighed heavily and braced herself for the worse. "I am looking for someone," she said. "My brother, Zeno 'Ribal'."

4. The Truth

__Authors**__****__**Note:**_**Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 3: The Truth

"Soâ€¦I should be finished with punishment tonight, right?" Zeno asked as he put his plate away, his eyes pleading.

"Hmm?" Sani looked up at him from the dinner table. "Oh I do not knowâ€¦," he said, teasingly. "I think you need another dayâ€¦."

"Aww, come on!" Zeno whined. "The last couple of nights have been rather cold and lonelyâ€¦,"

he added with a low voice. "I would have caught you too if I had not tripped at the last momentâ€¦."

"Oh alrightâ€¦consider yourself on probation for the next few days." There was a mischievous smirk on Sani's face.

"Now you are just being cruelâ€¦."

"I knowâ€¦but the look on your face is so worth it."

"Why youâ€¦come here!"

Sani squealed as he dove out of his chair, Zeno just missing him. Zeno chased him around the house a bit before finally catching and pinning him on the bed. "Now I got yaâ€¦," he said, triumphantly.

"Yes you do," Sani said softly, a smile on his face. "Nowâ€¦what are you going to do with me?"

"Well firstâ€¦," Zeno said, with a broad grin. "I am thinking of making up for the last few days we did not have any 'fun'."

"Oooâ€¦I am trembling with fearâ€¦please do not hurt meâ€¦."

"Would not dream of it, sweet." Zeno licked his neck. "I would not hurt you for anythingâ€¦." Before he could get started, however, there was a knock on the door.

"Ohâ€¦not again!" he groaned, releasing Sani and standing up. "I will get it." Zeno had every intention of telling whomever was at the door

to fuck off and leave them alone, family relation or otherwise. When he opened the door however, his mandibles dropped open in shock.

"Lila?" he said after taking a moment to recompose himself

"Brother," the female Sangheili said, relief in her voice as she practically collapsed in his arms. "I finally found you."

Zeno hugged his sister tightly; happy to see her again, though he was confused as to the why she bothered to travel all this way. He got some clues from how she was dressed: she was wearing one of her Gi'vea outfits, which hardly was appropriate for this region and a light cloak that did little more to protect her from the elements. Plus she looked exhausted, like she had been traveling non-stop for several days.

"Zeno who?" Sani said, breaking the moment.

"Sani," Zeno said, turning toward him as he ushered Lila into the house and closed the door. "Get something warm going on the stove, she is chilled to the bone."

Sani looked a little perturbed that he didn't answer his question, but nodded and disappeared into the kitchen area. In the meantime, Zeno guided Lila to the couch, wrapped her up in a heavy blanket and sat down next to her, rubbing her back. A moment later, Sani returned with a cup of warm Sangheilian tea, which Lila took gratefully and started sipping.

"Alright, Zeno's explanation," Sani said, glaring at him with his arms folded across his chest.

"This is my sister, Lila 'Ribal," Zeno explained. "Whom I have not seen in years. Lila, this is my mate, Sani 'Hilvum."

"A pleasure to meet you, Sani," Lila said, already looking better. "I am happy to see that my brother has found another to complete his life."

"Aye, so am I," Zeno said, smiling at Sani, whom blushed. "So, Lila, why are you here?" he asked, concern in his voice. "I would have thought by now you would have found yourself a good husband, considering it has been well over ten years since you became a fully trained Gi'vea."

"If things have been different, I likely would have, brother," Lila said sorrowfully.

"What is wrong?"

"There is something I need to tell you, brother," she said softly, Zeno hearing a great weight in her voice. "Something I have been wanting to tell you for many years, but I have been either unable, just missed you or you were not emotionally _stable_ enough to hear it."

"Why not just send me a message?" Zeno said, puzzled she would keep something so obviously important to herself for so long. Then he

remembered a long time ago, back on High Charity, when Lila mentioned she wanted to tell him something then as well, but never did get the chance to due to all the crap that had happened afterward.

"I could not, because I did not want to risk him finding out," Lila explained. "Plus I know how you will react to this, so I preferred to tell you face to face."

"Himâ€|who is him."

"Ley."

Zeno was taken back a bit. "Ley may be the keeps blademaster, but he does not have the authority to access private communications, Lila."

"He is not just a blademaster anymoreâ€|he is the kaidon."

He wished he hadn't just finished eating a few moments ago, for he felt it wanting to come back up at that bit of news. "What! Ley was never in the military, which is practically a requirement to become kaidon: how the hell did he get elected to become kaidon?"

"That is all part of what I need to tell you, brother."

"Then I think you should start telling, sister."

Lila nodded, a heavy sigh emitting from her mandibles. She was quiet for a moment before she began. "I will start with the part that I know will tear at your hearts and will be the most difficult to reveal. Kouâ€|his death was not natural, or due to battle. He was executed."

Zeno blinked at his sister, the words she just said taking their sweet time sinking in. It had been bad enough that he had died before his message had reached him. Bad enough that he died before he could see him again. But thisâ€|this was worse than he could ever imagine. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Sani sit down beside him and squeeze his hand. "Whaâ€|Why?" he choked out. "What did he do?"

"Nothing, but perhaps love his son too much," Lila said, tears in her eyes.

It took him a moment to catch that. "Sâ€|son?"

"Yes, Zeno, you and I, we are his children."

It made sense now, why Kou did all he did for him. Why he trained him himself, protected him. Everything. "Butâ€|loving your children is not a crimeâ€|," he said, struggling to understand.

"No, it is not," Lila confirmed. "He died because he never lost faith in you, no matter what others were saying about you."

Zeno got what she was meaning. "Yuteriâ€|."

Lila nodded. "When his report about your supposed heresy and treachery reached the keep, Kou refused to believe it. For a number

of weeks, he refused the advice of the elders to act as anyone else would have: to strip you of your name and mark you for death. He kept saying he wanted absolute proof of your crimes, that the report was not enough to convince him. It was Ley that started the final downward spiral for him."

"What did he do?"

"First, he convinced the elders that Kou was no longer fit to serve as kaidon; that he had strayed too far from the Path."

"But the only way to remove a kaidon from power is through deathâ€¦."

"To fully remove him, yes. You forget that there are circumstances where a kaidon can be temporarily _relieved_ of his status."

"When he is away from the keep on a military campaign, or a case of extreme injury or illness."

"Or when the kaidon has been accused of a crime of heresy, which was what happened to Kou. When that happened, the elders gave Ley temporary kaidonship while Kou's case was investigated."

"That does not make senseâ€¦," Sani said. "If the kaidon is not able to lead, it is the elders that take over until he is able to again, or a new one is elected."

"Normally, yes, but somehow Ley was able to convince the elders otherwise. Kou was allowed to roam the keep, but under constant guard. The only place he was allowed complete peace was when he came to see me: this was how I learned of his troubles."

"A counseling session with a _Gi__'__vea_ is private, no matter what else is going on," Zeno muttered, grateful that Kou had someone to turn to during this trying time.

"It was during this time that Kou told me something about Ley that disturbs me to this day."

"What is that?"

"Soon after Ley gained temporary kaidon status, he started attempting to blackmail Kou. He kept telling Kou, that he knew a way to make his troubles go all away. His price: that he become his lover."

"Waâ€¦|Waitâ€¦|Whaâ€¦|What?" Zeno couldn't believe what he just heard: it didn't make sense at all. "Ley is a _semo?_"

"It would seem so."

"Butâ€¦|why? Why then did he treat me as he did? He only got worse toward me when he found out I was a _semo_â€¦|"

"I do not know brother, it puzzles me as well."

There was a long moment of silence in the room. "H-how did Kou respond to this?"

"He refused his _offer_," Lila said flatly. "Called him a coward for resorting to such dishonorable tactics. Needless to say, Ley did not take the rejection well and openly vowed to have you hunted down and slain. Kou knew how to prevent that though."

Zeno had a feeling he knew how, but nodded for her to proceed anyway.

"At the next hearing, Kou demanded the right of substitution. To take your supposed shame onto himself as if it was his own. And thus take your punishment himself. The elders could not refuse his requestâ€|and thus Ley was denied his chance to have you killed."

A wave of fresh sorrow coursed threw him at this revelation. Zeno lowered his head and openly wept. "Oh Kouâ€|you gave your life for meâ€|never to know what I have becomeâ€|."

"Wait, that does not make any senseâ€|," Sani said as he rubbed Zeno's back. "From what I understand with other keeps, if the sire of a line is shamed, it is not just him that is executed but his descendants as well. Soâ€|wouldn't technically Zeno's lifeâ€|and yours as well, still be forfeit?"

"Whether the descendants die depends heavily on the whim of the kaidon or the elders, along with the circumstances the shame occurred," Lila explained. "Plus when a substitution occurs, it is just for that single life. Since Zeno has no children, the execution chain would have ended with him anyway, thus the chain ended with Kou when he gave up his own life in Zeno's stead."

"I think I understandâ€|," Sani said. "The customs of other keeps can be so confusingâ€|."

"Oh and Zeno, I think Kou _did_ know you were actually cleared." Zeno raised his head and blinked at her. "The day of his executionâ€|I received your message," Lila explained. "The moment I realized what it contained, I rushed to the execution plaza, hoping to be able to stop the killing blowâ€|."

* * *

><p>2544, Ribal Keep, Sanghelios

"_Let me through!" Lila cried, shoving and pushing through the crowd. She could hear Ley describe Kou's crimes over the mummers of the crowd, crimes that were false as proven by the message she held in her hands. Oh please oh please let me make it in time! She thought, tears of despair and desperation in her eyes._

"_Do you have any last words." She heard Ley say._

"_Only, that I have faith that the truth will come forth," Kou's unmistakable voice replied._

So close! Just a little further! "Please! I must get through!" she cried desperately.

"_Humph, your faith is misplaced." She saw a raised arm, the signal to strike._

No! With one final effort she pushed through, spilling onto the dirt of the execution circle itself. When she looked up, she saw she was too late. Twin prongs of the executioners blade were sticking out of Kou's chest. Yetâ€|Kou still lived, though barely. Though in unimaginable pain, he looked at her, his dying eyes focusing on her. A smile, a faint smile of joy, formed on his mandibles: Lila thought she saw a hint of tears. Then he coughed, blood spraying from his mouth, and he was gone.

Lila could only stare for a long agonizing moment. She was too late, too late to save his life, yetâ€|not too late to ease his soul. But it was not enough to ease her own pain, not enough to cool the anger now swelling in her chest.

"_Lila," Ley said, annoyance in his voice. "You do not belong here; go back to the Gi'vea house."_

She ignored him, approaching Kou's corpse and wrapping her arms around his limp neck, weeping softly. "Lila! Away from there!" Ley said angrily and she felt him grab her arm.

Reacting on instinct, she spun around and smacked Ley in the face. Caught completely by surprised, he stumbled and fell, a collective gasp heard from the crowd. "Hands off me you backstabbing, blackmailing, cretin!" she hissed. Then she stepped away and looked around at the crowd, many cringing at her glare, before setting her eyes upon the elders. "You killed an innocent man!"

The elders looked at each other uncomfortably, the surrounding crowd murmuring with surprise and shock. "Innocent?" Ley growled, now on his feet again. "How could he have been innocent when he had strayed so far from the Path because of that vileu Zeno? A Sangheili that abandoned his own squad to join the heathen humans! Kou brought this upon himself by naively refusing to believe his own blood could do anything wrong!"

"_No, you are wrong," Lila countered, holding up the pad. "I received just today, a message from Zeno, sent from the holy city of High Charity itself!" The murmurs from the crowd got louder. "In it, he tells the real story of what happened!" Ley held out his hand for the pad, but Lila thrust it into the hands of the nearest elder instead, not trusting Ley in the slightest. Her action greatly disturbed Ley, going by the brief hint of fear in his eyes._

For several minutes, everyone was quiet as the elders read the message. No one moved as the elders conversed among themselves for another few minutes. Finally, one spoke. "A grievous error has been made this day," he said regretfully. "A man's honor wrongly tainted and a life wrongfully taken. Zeno 'Ribalee, was betrayed by his Field Master and left on the planet to die. He was later found by a team of special operations troops, lead by Commander Anko 'Tidumee and he assisted them in a mission of great importance. He sacrificed his honor, dignity and nearly his life to see that the mission succeeded.

"_For his efforts, he was permitted to be transferred to the special operations wing of the Covenant and will be serving in the Fleet of Particular Justice. He has brought a great honor, not shame, to our keep."_

Lila looked at Ley, whom looked shocked and overwhelmed. He started to shake his head in disbelief. "It cannot be," he said. "That must be a forgery! I demand verification!"

"_Like Kou demanded verification?" Lila said coolly. "Verification you adamantly opposed to giving him? An opposition that resulted in his wrongful death?"_

Ley opened his mouth, but then snapped it shut again, unable to counter. Instead, he stormed about of the plaza, the crowd making way for him. After he was gone, a couple of guards approached Kou's body, unshackling it from the posts and laying it flat on the ground in a position of honor. "What has been done, cannot be undoneâ€|," one of the elders said regrettably. "But we shall honor his memory and sacrifice."

* * *

><p>"They gave Kou an honorable burial later that day, a service Ley did not attend. Ley was not seen for several days, some wondered if he had committed suicide. When he reappeared, he seemed different, like the weight of what he had done was heavy on his soul. He made a heartfelt plea to the elders to continue on as kaidon, to atone for his mistake. The eldersâ€|agreed."<p>

"The foolsâ€|," Zeno growled. "They should have demanded him to take his own life instead!"

"Many agreed, but the elder's decision was final. Ley actually did well for a while, but over timeâ€| He started making mistakes and allegiances that have stood for generations have started to falter. Around that time, a small group of the guard, lead by a captain named Uslo, appeared to become Ley's favored. They started bullying and harassing the populous, doing whatever they wanted, claiming it was under Ley's bidding. Uslo himself was especially bad, but Ley seemed blind to his sins. Worse, Uslo had no respect for the Gi'vea."

"Oh noâ€|," Zeno had a feeling he knew where this was going.

"He harassed us constantly, demanding breeding rights from us. Naturally we refused him. Again, Ley did not seem to care."

"Which is strange," Zeno said, scratching a mandible. "From what I remember, if he loved anything it was the Gi'vea and was a big supporter."

"I do not know what happened to change his stance on us, but he did nothing when Uslo pulled his next stunt. Recently, he took a shine to me especially and tried to force himself upon me."

Zeno felt his blood rise as he growled. "I certainly hope you hit him where it counted."

"Oh I did and the look on his face was rather comical. However I got thrown into the dungeon for my 'insolence'. He told me I was going to stay there until I 'learned my proper place'."

"Arrogant foolâ€|," Zeno growled. "The Gi'vea are equal to the swordsman in regards to status: he was way out of line!"

"Indeedâ€|. "

"It is obvious you got out, Lila," Sani said. "Considering you are here before us now."

"Please tell me you did not submit to his wishesâ€|.", " Zeno begged.

"Do not worry, brother, I did not submit," Lila reassured him. "But neither did Uslo have a change of heart, nor did Ley demand my release."

"Then howâ€|."

"Something completely unexpectedâ€|." From her tone it seemed she still had trouble believing it herself. "Something that is a tale all its ownâ€|."

5. Surprise Rescue

Authors__**Note:**__Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 4: Surprise rescue

A Couple of weeks agoâ€|__

The __cell __was __cold, __damp __and __dirty: __it __was __no __place __for __a __Gi__'__vea __like __her. __She __could __hear __the __various __screams, __cries __and __moans __of __other __dungeon __occupants, __individuals __that __truly __deserved __to __be __in __here. _Or maybe notâ€|, _Lila __thought, __correcting __herself. __With __how __things __were __going, __she __wouldn__'__t __be __surprised __if __some __other __innocent __individuals __were __down __here __as __well._

Her stomach grumbled painfully, causing her to wince. She had not eaten in three days, having refused any of the slop the guards offered her during meal times. It wasn't out of pride of her status, but out of fear Uslo or one of his cronies may have laced the food with a sedative so they could have their way with her without resistance. That would have been the greatest shame for a Gi'vea:, to be raped with no means of fighting back. Lila had vowed to resist, even if it killed her, even if it meant she would never be able to fulfill her other vow.

Oh, brotherâ€|Zeno_, __she __thought __with __a __sigh._At this rate, it appears Kou's line will end completely._

_A __sound __she __hadn__'__t __heard __before __caught __her __attention. __It __sounded __like __stone, __scrapping __against __stone. __A __nearby __guard __had __also __heard __it __and __had

__moved __to __investigate __it. __The __next __thing __Lila __heard __was __a __brief __scuffle, __followed __by __silence. __What was that all about? __Lila __wondered.__

__She got her answer a moment later when a dark cloaked figure stopped in front of her cell, his face mostly hidden in shadow. Immediately, she tensed, standing up and hissing. Was this some trick of Uslo's?__

"_Peace, Lila," the newcomer said, his voice low and obviously male. "I am not here to harm you, but to free you."__

__Lila growled lowly in warning anyway as the man unlocked the door to her cell. She tried to get a good look at his features, to see if she knew the man, but he kept his face hidden. "How can trust someone that hides his identity?" she hissed. "And how do you know my name?"__

"_Word of your act has spread across the keep, despite Uslo's attempts to bury it," the man replied. "As for me: you know better than most how things are going in this keep. Even if I was not who I was, it would be too risky, deadly even, to reveal my face. Come, please, before someone comes."__

__Lila hesitated, uncertain if she should trust him or not. He might have been hiding his face, but there was his voice and she believed she caught a faint whiff of his scent. Both were familiar to her, but she could not place it. Lila really wanted to be certain this was not one of Uslo's men, butâ€|here was a chance to escape and defy Uslo. She decided to take it.__

"_Alright," she said, taking his outstretched hand. "If this is a trick, however, I will not hesitate to fight back."__

"_Spoken like a Gi'vea," the man said, Lila catching a faint smile in the gloom. "Come, the way out is not far."__

__They walked down the corridor briefly before the strange male stopped in front of rather featureless part of the wall. On the floor close by was the guard she saw earlier, his neck bent at an unnatural angle. She watched as the man felt along the wall for a moment, muttering something to himself. His search started to become more frantic, until he found what he was looking for. He inserted a finger into a small drainage hole and a section of the wall sudden recessed and slid away. Now she knew what that sound she heard earlier was: it was the door to a secret tunnel opening!__

"_Iâ€|did not know there were secret tunnels in the keepâ€|," she mused quietly as the man ushered her in, then did something else to close the door.__

"_They were constructed many generations ago, during another low period for our keep," the man explained as he picked up a lightstick and started walking, Lila following. "Take care with your voice: some sections of the wall are not very thick."__

"_Why were they constructed?" Lila asked, making sure to keep her voice low as requested.__

"_The kaidon of the time was paranoid about coups, so had the tunnels

made in secret so should one occur he could escape."_

"_What a cowardâ€¦," Lila said in disgust. "I am surprised he was elected."_

"_He only got the position because he killed the previous kaidon by chance during a training exercise."_

"_Wha? I thought the elders had to elect the kaidon?"_

"_Only if the kaidon death was not at the ends of another Ribal. This rule wasâ€¦amendedâ€¦to specify that only during an official challenge can another Ribal can take the mantle by killing the kaidon."_

"_A good thing. So what happened to the kaidon that made these tunnels?"_

"_A coup did happen and he took the tunnels. However, in his panic, he took a wrong turn and came out right in front of a group of warriors that were a part of the coup. He died a coward's death and the kaidon that came after him decreed that his name be stricken from all official records. Over time, the tunnels themselves were also forgotten."_

"_If that is so, how did you find out about him and the tunnels?"_

She could hear the smile in his voice as he said. "Knowledge can be regained, if you know where to look. Though his name has been truly forgotten, as it should be, there are still a few stories told about him to warn the young about the price of cowardice. After some searching, I was able to find a few of the original construction plans."

"_That must have taken some time. In fact, I find it difficult to see how you could have found out about me, research the legend to find the plans and verify the tunnels actually exist in the relatively little time I was imprisoned."_

"_I have actually been researching this for months," the man said softly, a hint of shame in his voice. "Your situation just ended up being a perfect opportunity for a test run."_

"_Test run for what? A coup?"_

"_I wish I had that kind of pull, but no," the man said sadly. "I am not so brave myselfâ€¦."_

"_You risking your neck to rescue me is a rather brave act," Lila pointed out._

"_This small act of bravery is not enough to erase all the sins of my past."_

"_What do youâ€¦?"_

"_Hush, we are nearly there. I need to be sure the way is clear."_

Lila remained quiet as they arrived at what appeared to be a dead end, but suspected otherwise. Her suspicions were correct when the man touched something and the wall moved away, revealing what lay beyond. By the gods, it was the outside! Grass, treesâ€|she could see the river a short distance away. The air never smelled so good to her beforeâ€|.

"_The way is clear," the man said, stepping aside. "Head to the river, there is a ferryman there that is still loyal to me waiting. He will take you beyond the keep boundaries. After that, it is up to you."_

"_So I am in exile nowâ€|," Lila said with sigh as she realized what it meant._

"_I wish it were not so, Lila, but it is too dangerous for you to remain in the keep now, especially with your relation."_

"_My relationâ€|whatâ€|ohâ€|." Lila got what he was referring to, or more specially who._

"_Uslo knows he is one of the few remaining that may have the skill to oppose the kaidon. If the kaidon falls to another besides him, he loses his power."_

"_Do you think my brother is at risk of being killed by an assassin?"_

"_I have no proof, but I suspect Uslo desires kaidonship for himself and thus has been setting things in motion to ensure it. If he feels your brother could be a threat to those plans, he may very well see about having him eliminated, especially now that he does not have the protection of the High Council."_

Lila nodded, seeing the logic. There was a chance that Zeno may very well want to come back to challenge Ley once she told him what really happened to Kou. "You want Zeno to come back and challenge the kaidon, so Uslo loses his powerâ€|."

"_Of all the people I know, he is the most deserving to do so. However, he is also the one I would not blame if he decided to leave the keep to fall completely. So many wrongsâ€|."_

"_Indeedâ€|, but would it not be easier for someone to take out Uslo instead?"_

At this the man flinched and became very nervous. "That has its own dangers," he replied. "Remember, Uslo is the captain of the keep guard: if he was found murdered, the kaidon would be obligated to find the one responsible and have him dealt with. No, the safest way to deal with Uslo is for someone to defeat the kaidon in a duel and become kaidon himself. After that, the new kaidon can do whatever he wants to Uslo."

"_I seeâ€|."_

"_Here," The man pressed a small datachip into her hand. "It is a copy of the tunnel plans I found. He will need it, if he decides to return."_

"_You are not coming with me?"_

"_Alas, due to my station I cannot risk leaving the groundsâ€|and I fear I may have been absent for too long already."_

"_Then I will not take up anymore of your time, good man. Thank youâ€|and good luck."_

* * *

><p>Present Dayâ€|.

"He was true to his word," Lila said. "The ferryman took me outside the keep borders. By then, I knew Uslo will have known I had escaped and would be searching for me, so I avoided public transport."

"Waitâ€|that meansâ€|," Zeno said, his face going pale.

"Yes, I hitchhiked all the way here," Lila confirmed.

"By the gods, Lila! You ran the risk of running into the biggest slimeballs on the planet!"

"I know, but fortunately, I did not: every single Sangheili that gave me a lift was polite and respectful."

"The spirits were watching over you, that was for certain," Sani said. "But what now? This man clearly desires for Zeno to return to his keep and challenge the kaidon."

"There is no way I can win against Ley," Zeno grumbled. "I may be good with the sword, but Ley is better. _Much_ better. Only reason I am still alive from the last time I got into a fight with Ley was because Kou intervened!"

"But you also had little training then, Zeno," Lila reminded him. "You would stand a far better chance now."

"Perhaps, but regardless of my skill level, I owe _nothing_ to our keep," Zeno growled. "With the exception of Kou and you, Lila, everyone saw me as a worthless freak that was just taking up keep resources. Kou is deadâ€|and you are in exile now. What is left for me there? No, I would rather the keep rot than to go back."

"Not even to avenge the one that gave his life for you?" Sani asked.

At that Zeno sighed. "I want Ley dead, make no mistake about that, but I am trying to be rational here for once. There is a good chance I will _fail_ the challenge and where would that leave you and Lila? And even if by some _fluke_ I did win, what would be the point of being the kaidon of a keep where everyone hated you for what you are? Surely there are others not only more qualified, but better _liked_ than me that can challenge him."

"All those that would have had a chance were either lost during Schism, failed when they did challenge Ley, or are loyal to Uslo," Lila said regretfully. "You are one of the only ones left, Zeno, and Uslo knows this. If he feels you are a threatâ€|"

Zeno looked toward the door, wondering if there was, indeed, was indeed an assassin with a sword with his name on it coming for him. "Then I will not be a threat," Zeno said. "I just want to live the rest of my life in relative peace, no politics, no assassins, nothing. Iâ€|just hope Kou understands thatâ€|."

"I believe Kou would respect whatever decision you make, Zeno," Lila said softly.

"Then it is settled. We forget about the State of Ribal and make our living here, where we are wanted and respected," Zeno said. "I will see about getting you a place of your own tomorrow, Lila, along with proper clothing. In the meantime, it is getting lateâ€|and I am certain you are tired from your long journey: go ahead and use our bed tonight."

"Thank you, brother," Lila said gratefully as she rose from the couch. "This will be the first time I will have had a full night's sleep in daysâ€|Good night, brother, Sani."

"Good night, Lila."

"Waitâ€|if she is sleeping in our bedâ€|," Sani said as Lila climbed under the covers.

"Yes, Sani: we are both sleeping on the couch tonight," Zeno said, slightly smugly.

"Oh no. I sleep on the couch, you sleep on the floor."

"Dammit!"

* * *

><p>A few days laterâ€|

Snow was falling.

Standing outside of her new home, bundled up in layers of clothing, Lila watched the tiny flakes fall. Occasionally, one would drift onto her face, only to instantly melt and leave a tiny spot of cold moisture behind. The same happened when it hit the ground, giving the flakes no chance to cover it with their white forms.

Zeno had told her that the human homeworld had snow as well, snow that came in different sizes and shapes and could fall heavily enough to bury a small building. Lila wished she could visit Earth to see it for herself, along with the other wonders the planet had. While she was still bound to the troupe, requests to go to earth to perform for their new human allies were denied due to the schism. After that, it was denied to the risk of Kesi intercepting their transport and kidnapping them.

By the time things had settled down, more than ten years had passed since she became a fully trained Gi'vea. She was a Fu__Gi__'__vea__ now, unbound, and expected to find and take a suitable husband, thus restricted to Sanghelios until she found one, provided her future husband would allow her to travel. If Zeno had been still ambassador,

perhaps he could have pulled some strings, but no, the foolish High Council saw fit to remove him from his station for being too good at his job.

Oh brother, you are as much a prisoner on this world as I am, Lila thought, lifting her head to the sky to allow the snowflakes to hit her face directly. No, perhaps you are more of a prisoner of your own doubts and fears.

She was not so certain that the general populous of their keep still viewed him with the disdain he endured as an adolescent. The Great Schism, the Great Journey being proven to be a false belief and other events, could have set the motion for a change in viewpoints in many things. In fact, when she was still at the keep, she overheard a few positive things about Zeno from the serfs. Granted, it was usually about his barbs at the High Council, which was still regaining favor due to the Kesi fiasco.

It was something, but Lila suspected it would not be enough to convince Zeno to return. Besides, it seemed he had grown quite comfortable here and who could blame him? The people here were, as a whole, open-minded, generous and kind. The only issue was that they did not see Gi'vea as important as other keeps. Then again, Lila found it to be a breath of fresh air: to be treated kindly for who you are rather than what you are felt much more satisfying. Here, she was just Zeno's sister and that was good enough for her. Perhaps I can find a good husband here, she mused.

"Lila 'Ribal."

"Hmm?" She turned her head toward the voice, only to wish she hadn't. A short distance away and getting closer by the second, were a trio of armor clad warriorsâ€|

â€|wearing the colors of the Ribal keep.

No! How did they find me so quickly! she thought as she bolted back into her residence, closing and locking the door behind her. Then she remembered the swordsman she encountered when she first arrived. Himâ€|it had to be him. He was close enough to hear me ask about my brother. By the Gods, did she just jeopardize them both?

There was a bigger problem to worry about right now though, as she just realized there was no way out of the house beyond the door she just came in. A door they were already pounding on, trying to break it open. She was trapped, like a rat in its hole.

I will not go down without a fight! she growled as she looked around for a weapon of some sort. Outside she heard them shouting at others to stay away, saying something about this being 'Ribal' business. Lila had no doubt that one of the onlookers will have the presence of mind to get a message to Zeno about this: the question now, was whether or not Zeno would get here in time.

Behind her, she heard the door crack and she knew she was running out of time. That she knew they would want her alive was of no comfort, for she knew what to expect when they got her back to the keep. That is, if these cronies of Uslo didn't decide to ravage her before they

got there. _A _knife!_ she thought with a small smile as she entered the kitchen and picked up said object. It was useless against armor, but she knew there were some softer points she could poke them at: hopefully it would be enough to deter them until Zeno arrived.

There was another loud crack, followed by a thud as the door fell to the floor. The three warriors ran in, their squad leader in the front. "Guard the door and ensure none of those weaklings try to interfere," the squad leader said. "I will apprehend this criminal."

"You are the criminals!" Lila hissed. "For blatantly disrespecting the pact with the Gi'vea!"

The squad leader chuckled as he stalked closer. "You Gi'vea are nothing more than females that think you are more important than you really are," he said. "It is long past time for the likes of you to be put into your place."

Lila roared and swung with the knife, aiming for his unprotected face. However, the squad leader caught her arm easily. "Cute," he said, amused, before twisting her hand, forcing her to drop the knife. "I think we need to knock you down a few pegs before we take you back to the keep." With that he shoved her onto the bed.

No! she thought, as she wailed at him with her hands and feet. _Not _like _this!_ She got slapped for her effort.

"Be still and take it like a real female!" the squad leader growled. Then he grinned lustfully as he started to remove his armor to do the deed. "Do not worry, you will enjoy this!"

Lila hissed and gave one last kick, striking him in the groin. He gasped and doubled over, but he recovered lot quicker than she expected and he was not happy. "You little whore!" He struck her again, this time with a closed fist. The blow nearly rendered her unconscious. "I guess I need to soften you up a bit first so you will be more compliant!"

He raised his fist again and Lila closed her eyes, preparing herself for the blow. A blow that never came. Instead, she felt the squad leader's weight lift off her and she heard a crash on the other side of the room. When she opened her eyes, she breathed a sigh of relief. Zeno was hereâ€|

â€|and he was _not_ happy.

6. Decision

__**Authors**__ __**Note:**_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 5: Decision

Zeno had been making his way home when a Hilvum informed him that his sister's household was under attack by outsiders: Ribals, to be precise. When he had demanded why the other _Tal_ were not stopping it, he was told they were not sure if they could as it seemed to be an internal affair with another keep and that they had no right to interfere. Understanding, Zeno set off to take care of the problem himself.

As he approached his home, he immediately recognized Rolo and Vini standing outside, _former_ childhood friends of his. It was obvious to him that these two never left Sanghelios, even during the Great Schism: he could not help but allow himself a small smile of pride at that. However, that pride was short lived when he realized one of the attackers was missing: he was told there were three of them. From the state of the door, he could guess the third was inside.

"Halt!" Rolo growled, brandishing his pole arm when he saw him approach. "This Ribal business, you are not to interfere!"

"I am a Ribal, so I am afraid this _is_ my business!" Zeno growled as he charged between them. From the looks on their faces after he spoke, it appeared they recognized him and were shocked into inaction. Fine by him. What he saw next though nearly threw him into a bloody rage.

The third Ribal attacker was the squad leader, going by his armor, but this man was in the process of attempting to _rape_ his sister! With a hiss, he seized the foul man by the shoulders and threw him off, sending him crashing into some furniture. "Lila," he asked, glancing back toward her only briefly. "Are you alright?"

"Yes," Lila replied, a grateful tone in her voice. "You arrived just in timeâ€¦."

"Who dares!" the squad leader growled, untangling himself from the broken furniture. "You are interfering with Ribal Keep business!"

"From what I recall," Zeno said with an edge to his voice. "It is not the Ribal way to chase after Gi'vea and rape them. It is also _not_ the Sangheili way, let alone Ribal, to disrespect a Gi'vea. Am I looking upon a Sangheili that is more akin to a Brute?"

"Who are youâ€¦," the squad leader growled.

"It is Zeno, sirâ€¦," Vini replied from the doorway, looking nervous. "The former ambassadorâ€¦."

"And also Sub-Commander of Special Operations," Zeno added. "Rather ironic is it not? You two shunned me for what I am and yet it would seem I have risen in the ranks further than you and Rolo ever did."

Rolo and Vini turned their heads away, ashamed at their failures to achieve their own dreams. Their squad leader, however, was not impressed. In fact, a sly smile crossed over his mandibles. "Zenoâ€¦well, well nowâ€¦it would seem the Intel we received about our other target was correct," he said.

"'Other target'?" Zeno growled, his eyes narrowing. "I want nothing to do with our keep: why are you after me?"

"Despite what you feel toward our keep, Zeno, we cannot allow a potential threat to the kaidon's life to continue breathing." Zeno started inching his hands toward the hilts of his swords while the man continued. "We only did not come after you before because it would have caused us more problems than it would be worth while you were still ambassador. How nice of the High Council to take care of that little obstacle for us. Rolo! Vini! Kill him!"

Zeno snapped out his kisans then, the blades flaring to life. Rolo and Vini, whom had started to move forward at the command, stopped in their tracks, looking very uncertain now. "I am not the untrained youth your hypocrite of a kaidon denied training to all those years ago," Zeno snarled. "I am not in the SpecOps due to my good looks, either."

"Hypocrit! You dare to insult your kaidon!"

"He is not my kaidon!" Zeno roared. "I will not follow a man that shunned me and tried to kill me for being a semo when he is a fucking semo himself!"

The squad leader's eyes widened at that. "How did youâ€¦?" He looked at Lila. "How much did youâ€¦|.?"

"Everything I knew!" Lila hissed.

"Gi'vea are not supposed to share their client's secrets!"

"When was the last time our keep cared about the Gi'vea code!"

The squad leader backed up a few paces at that statement, nearly tripping over broken furniture pieces in the process. Zeno pressed the advantage.

"The Ribal keep has lost their honor!" he declared. "It is dead, or soon will be! I only keep the name out of respect for the last honorable kaidon, Kou 'Ribal! He would be spinning in his grave over what is being done! Be gone from my sight and do not return!"

"You are wrong!" the squad leader growled. "Our keep is on the verge of a new age of glory and decedents like you must be purged before that can begin!"

The man drew his weapon and charged. However, he had forgotten that he was partly unarmored and thus his shields were not active. Zeno easily parried his blow with one sword and impaled him on the other. The squad leader gasped and staggered back, before his eyes rolled back into his head and collapsed, the life gone from his body. Rolo and Vini watched with mouths agape and eyes wide, neither making a move to retaliate.

"Let this serve as a warning," Zeno growled at them. "If any of you persist in pursuing me or my sister, you will meet the same fate. And if you piss me off enough, perhaps I will return to kick your kaidon's hypocritical ass! In other words: do not give me a reason to want to return!"

Rolo and Vini looked at each other, then turned and fled.

* * *

><p>Laterâ€|.

"The Council has decided to bar any Ribal from entering keep grounds unless they have you or Lila's express permission," Yura said as they sat around the dinner table.

"The problem with that is that it makes us pretty much prisoners here," Zeno said ruefully. "They will likely be watching and pounce the moment we step foot off Hilvum keep grounds."

"Provided that is they are not desperate enough to simply invade to take what they want," Sani said softly.

"Considering how Uslo isâ€|that would not surprise me in the least," Lila said.

"Something else is bothering me about all this," Zeno said. "That man knew about Ley being a semoâ€|."

"Yes and as far as I know, Kou only told me of the blackmail attempts."

"Lila, you said Uslo became Ley's favored. Does that mean there is an actual relationship going on between them?"

"I am not certain, brother, but given the current evidence it would appear to be so."

"It does not make sense!" Zeno rubbed his head. "Why shun and punish me for being a semo and then turn around and reveal himself to be one?"

"I do not know, Zeno," Sani said. "But I am more concerned about the fact they sent actual warriors after both of you, rather than hashin."

"The bounty list is controlled by the Sanghelios security forces," Zeno explained. "And they would not put our names on the list as we have not actually committed a crime."

"I seeâ€|So they are forced to send their own forces to try to apprehend or kill targets, thus risking the ire of the keeps such individuals are taking sanctuary in. Knowing this though does not help our situation."

Zeno pushed away from the table, stood up and wandered the room, deep in thought. From everything Lila had told him, Uslo was a power hungry bastard, one that would do anything to get what he wanted. If it was true he and Ley were in a relationship, then it was possible he had his eyes on becoming kaidon and if that happened, things would only get worse.

That man said they were on the verge of a new age of glory, he thought. What kind of glory was he talking about? That they have been trying to force the Gi'vea to breed against their will

seemed to be a clue. Was Uslo trying to increase the Ribal population for something? Conquest perhaps?

Many Sangheili are still confused on what their purpose is due to the revelation about the Great Journey, he reminded himself. Some still hunt the Brutes and Prophets just to give themselves a purpose. Those that do not do that are stuck here with no enemy to fight, forced to try to confirm back to mundane, social life. How many such Sangheili does Uslo have under this thumb with the promise of a new purpose?

If Uslo did plan on attempting to expand the Ribal State through conquest, he risked civil war erupting across the planet. Civil war that risked being ignited ever since the Great Journey was proved to be a lie and factions of Sangheili started disagreeing over what to do now. Zeno knew that civil war, in their current state, would devastate their species, even more so than another full scale war with another race. This was turning out to be potentially a bigger problem than just the State of Ribal.

Yet, cutting off Uslo's head may show that he is a hydra, Zeno thought. It was clear Uslo had support and if he was taken out without kaidon approval, the consequences may be dire. Since Uslo was Ley's favored, kaidon approval would be highly unlikely. Zeno had no reason to believe Ley's views toward him would have changed, so Zeno doubted any amount of evidence would turn Ley against Uslo.

Zeno sighed, not liking where his thought process was going. He still doubted he could defeat Ley in an official challenge. Assassination would be easier, especially if he had the full element of surprise. However, that risked Uslo being elected to kaidon anyway and there was no guarantee he would be able to kill Uslo as well before he was caught. No, Ley himself would need to be taken out in order to remove Uslo from power, just like the man that rescued Lila said.

Now he was fighting against his own fears and doubts. If he tried and failed, Uslo would ultimately have his way unless Ley turned against him. Yet if he did nothing, the same would happen anyway. If he did this, he had to succeed and unlike his duel with Koni, the odds were stacked against him this time.

Are you a fighter? Or a coward?

Kou's words came unbidden, making him flinch, yet the question applied to this situation. Was he not running away from his past again? From his duties as a Ribal? His duties as a Sangheili?

Zeno sighed heavily, the weight of this dilemma heavy on his hearts. He looked at Sani, whom looked back at him with worried eyes.

Our time together has been so short, he thought.

It is wrong to put him through this, but what choice do I have?

* * *

><p>Sani knew the moment Zeno looked at him with those apologetic, sad eyes that he would not like what he said next.<p>

"I have changed my mind," Zeno said softly. "I will return my keep

and challenge the kaidon."

"No!" Sani cried, springing to his feet. "If you do that, you will die!"

"_Might_ die," Zeno corrected him. "There is a chance, however slim, that I may succeed."

"But if you failâ€¦."

"If I fail, the same thing will happen if I do nothing."

Sani rushed forward and gripped him by his shirt with both hands. "I would rather you do nothing than risk losing you!" he cried, tears in his eyes.

"Saniâ€¦it is not like you to be selfishâ€¦."

He recoiled at that, a bit hurt by the words. "What do you mean?"

"This is bigger than just the two of us, Sani," Zeno said. "Bigger than just my keep for that matter. While I have no proof, I suspect Uslo may be plotting conquest. Why else would he be trying to force the Gi'vea to breed against their will?"

"There has been an increase of young over the last several years," Lila confirmed. "Forcing us to breed as well would increase that even more."

"Sangheili society is unstable as a whole," Zeno explained. "The unification the Covenant provided is gone and old grudges and desires are starting to surface again. If Uslo really is plotting conquest, doing so may trigger other keeps to do the same, resulting in a full out, multi-faction civil war."

"Which we cannot affordâ€¦," Sani conceded, letting go of Zeno's clothing. "Such a thing may happen anyway thoughâ€¦."

"Perhaps, but if it can be delayed, it will give our society more time to stabilize."

"Always thinking about othersâ€¦even if cost you your lifeâ€¦." Sani leaned into him, feeling Zeno wrap his arms around him. "I do not want to lose youâ€¦not after everything we have already been throughâ€¦."

"I do not want to die eitherâ€¦," Zeno confessed softly. "I want enjoy many years with you, Sani, but right nowâ€¦the threat against us is too great to sit and ignore it."

"What are we to do while you march off to your likely death?"

"Stay here. What I am planning to do, is best I do alone. Secrecy will be my best chance of succeeding: the longer it takes for them to know what I am planning, the more likely I will succeed." There was a pause, then Sani felt himself be pushed away to arms length. He looked up at him questioningly and saw great pain in his mate's eyes. "Saniâ€¦," Zeno said. "Should you get word of my fallâ€¦Marry my sister."

"What!" Sani exclaimed, stepping away from him. He looked back at Lila to see her just as shocked as he. "There is no way I couldâ€¦".

"Saniâ€¦ Uslo is not a swordsman and Ley would not take her anyway as he is related by blood. If I fail, you marrying her would keep her out of his hands. Plus, you would have your entire keep to protect you both: I doubt Uslo would be stupid enough to try to kill you over a single Gi'vea with the risk of terrible losses."

"His logic is sound," Lila said sadly. "It is the best way to keep me from Uslo's hands."

Sani shook his head, but could not defeat the logic either. "Alright," he said, defeated. "I do not like it, but alright. I promise to take care of her to the best of my ability."

Zeno smiled, it was a sad one, but still a smile. "Thank you, sweet," he said, pulling him back into an embrace, one Sani returned this time. "It will be one less thing for me to worry about."

* * *

><p>Zeno had one last passionate night with Sani before departing the very next day. It was hard to leave, knowing they may never see each other again. He almost changed his mind once more, but ultimately kicked aside his desires for the greater cause and forced himself to go. All he took with him was his SpecOps armor, his swords and the plans of the secret tunnel network in the keep.<p>

The Hilvums were able to provide him with transport via spirit to another keep they had trade relations with. From there, he stowed away on a spirit heading to another keep that was close to the State of Ribal. The last leg was the riskiest, as he had no way of knowing if Uslo would have his cronies inspecting very transport into the state or not. Whatever gods there were seemed to be smiling upon him: no guards came to inspect the goods for contraband or stow-a-ways.

As far as he knew, he was the only Ribal that was a SpecOps, let alone in a SpecOps Sub-commander. This meant that if anyone saw a SpecOps Sub-commander walking around keep grounds would be immediately suspected of being him. So he stayed in active camo as he explored his old home, taking in any information from the gossiping serfs that may be useful and the general state of things.

Things were tense, to say the least. Male serfs looked around, expecting a fight to erupt at any moment, while those that were actually armed seemed to be looking for one. Females talked in hushed voices and children did not play as loudly or boisterously. There were also fewer guards walking around than what he remembered, which flew in the face of his suspicions.

A conversation between two dock workers caught his attention. They were talking about an apparent deployment of a large number of warriors out of the keep that very morning. Was Uslo already starting a conquest? Was he too late?

"Why send out so many of our warriors?" one of the serfs asked the

other. "Does that not leave us a bit helpless?"

"Pfft," the other serf snorted. "From what I have heard, this all over a Gi'vea. Heard one of the warriors mention that she took sanctuary in a northern keep."

"And he did this not knowing the capabilities of this keep?"

"Not an invasion, apparently, just a blockade. To try to force the keep to hand her over."

So, that explained the absence of most of the guard. Uslo was trying to scare the Hilvums into just handing Lila over and likely him as well. He nearly gave himself away with a chuckle at Uslo's ignorance: the Hilvums were a self-sufficient keep and would outlast any blockade. Still, this meant he did not have much time, for there was no telling in how patient Uslo will be. There was also the chance the blockade was a front for a covert op. Either way, he could not afford to waste time, but he also could not afford to rush things. He needed more informationâ€|

â€|and to find out who was friend or foe.

7. Allies

__Authors**__** **__**Note:**__** Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 6: Allies

Zeno spent a couple of days doing reconnaissance. It felt weird, doing recon on his own keep, but it was necessary for what he needed to do. One thing he did was sneak into the keep archives and search through the messages from High __Charity__. He did this to verify that the High Council back then sent the keep notice of the charges against him being dropped, which it had. Zeno also found out that Ley obtained temporary kaidon status shortly before the message arrived and that it had been read by him. This was what Ley was trying to use as blackmail material against Kou, but it was of no help to him beyond satisfying his curiosity: even if he could get this information to the elders, the elders could do nothing about it now. He would have loved to stay in that building to try to dig up more, particularly on Uslo, but decided not to risk it. A guard had nearly spotted him twice while he was there already.

He also went around and verified the various secret tunnel entrances dotted around the keep. Sadly, many of them either no longer functioning due to lack of care or were in less than ideal locations for infiltration. Those that did work and were useful to him, he carefully noted on his armors HUD for future use. Besides that, he spent time listening in on serf gossip and watching guard movements.

Zeno saw whom he believed to be Uslo a couple of times, walking around like he owned the place with a smug grin seemingly permanently affixed to his face. One of those times he felt confident he could have struck him down, but held back, reminding himself that Ley was his primary target. Speaking of the kaidon, he had seen no sign of him outside the main keep walls: from the serf gossip it sounded like he kept himself within the main keep these days. A part of Zeno wondered if Ley was even still alive and Uslo and his cronies were simply acting like he still lived. This theory was proved wrong when he saw Ley up high, on the balcony of the Master Room: unfortunately he was too far away for Zeno to accurately gauge his disposition.

Moving about was easy, thanks to the active camo, but finding substance and a safe place to sleep had been a challenge. He was forced to steal food and drink, an act that shamed him and vowed to repay should he succeed in his task. As for sleeping places: the first night he slept in someone's basement which he accessed through a broken window. Second night he slept in an old ruin on the outskirts of the keep town; however nightmares of the day his mother died haunted him throughout that night, so he opted to find a different place.

This time, he decided to try the feeding storage for the _ma__'__esi_, the mounts his people used to drive the agyat herds. He remembered working for the herdmaster here as a boy, mucking out the pens each day while the _ma__'__esi_ were out with their riders, feeding and grooming the animals when they came back in for the night. Zeno also knew that once all the _ma__'__esi_ were settled in, hardly anyone came around unless it was birthing season. A season that was already over for the year.

To get to the feeding storage though, he had to pass through the _ma__'__esi_ stables. Zeno walked as quietly as he could, hoping not to spook the animals. Ears flicked and nostrils flared as he passed, a couple of the dominant mares stamped their feet and hissed in agitation.

"_Och,__och. __Ya'kada,_" Zeno said softly, mostly out of reflex, hoping to keep the beasts calm and from alerting any serfs that may still be about. It seemed to work, for the mares quieted and Zeno reached the feeding storage stable without incident. His luck must be starting to run out though, for he found the stable locked tight and he uttered a soft Sangheilian curse.

Then his luck ran out completely. The end of a driving spear found his throat, but did not penetrate his armor and shielding, though his camo did flare, revealing his form briefly before it stabilized once more. Carefully, he turned his head to look upon the one that had spotted him and saw none other than Herdmaster Koro himself.

"I have been waiting to see if the pair of serfs I have suspected have been romping in the feed a couple of times a week and spooking the _ma__'__esi_, would show up tonight," Koro said, his voice a low growl. "Seems I caught something far different instead. Explain yourself, interloper, and quickly, unless you want to take your chances with that bastard we have for a captain of the keep guard."

The last sentence gave Zeno a bit of hope: it would seem Koro did not

care for Uslo and perhaps the herdmaster would be willing to help him. It was a risk he had to take, considering the circumstances. "Stay your blade, honorable herdmaster," he said carefully, deactivating his camo and revealing himself fully. "I am no threat to your herds, or to you."

"A Special Operations Sub-commander," Koro said, his remaining eye wide: the other had been lost to an errant bull agyat long before Zeno had joined the military. "Have things become so dire that our military is now spying on us?"

"Nay, herdmaster, I come for my own, personal reasons." Zeno reached up and pulled off his helmet, revealing his face. "Do you recognize me, herdmaster?"

Koro squinted through the gloom of the stable and his eye widened once more. "I do know you. By the gods, you bare such a resemblance to Kouâ€¦" Koro was silent for a moment, then he said with an air of urgency. "Put your helmet back on and follow me, invisibly. It is not safe to talk here."

Zeno did as he was asked. He followed the herdmaster as he finished his rounds, checking to see if the serfs had secured everything as they had should. At last, after nearly a half-hour, they arrived at the herdmaster's personal quarters. Zeno watched as the herdmaster closed all windows and locked the door, only then, did he signal to Zeno to uncloak once more.

"Uslo has spies everywhere," Koro explained. "Looking for anyone that they suspect may try to start a revolt or do anything to defy him. Many innocent Sangheili have been sent to the dungeons over these last several yearsâ€¦"

"Like my sisterâ€¦," Zeno said with a low growl.

"Aye. Such a terrible shame that Uslo and the kaidon violate the long standing pact with the Gi'vea. I assume your sister finding you is the reason you are here."

"That and more," Zeno admitted.

"I am glad she had found safetyâ€¦"

"For now. I have overheard the serfs talking about the blockade around the keep she shelters at."

"Ah! More shame!" Koro said disapprovingly. "He risks open warfare! Still, she is in a better situation than the Gi'vea still hereâ€¦"

This got his attention. "Why? What is going on?"

"I do not know how long you have been here, but surely you have noticed the guards around the Gi'vea house."

"I have, but it did not strike me as odd at the time," Zeno confessed. "There always been a couple of guards at the House."

"This started after your sister was imprisoned, so I doubt she knows

about it, but Uslo ordered the Gi'vea to be confined within the House. No one goes in, or out, until they submit to his demands."

"Waitâ€¦if no one is allowed in or out that meansâ€¦".

"Things like food and water are denied to them. By now, what food they had in storage would have run out."

This sent a fresh wave of anger through Zeno. Uslo had no right to do this and Ley was a fool to turn a blind eye. "The foolsâ€¦," he growled. "They are bringing our keep to ruin. The sooner I remove them both the betterâ€¦".

"Oh, so you are here to challenge Ley then?" Koro's face lit up briefly before turning serious. "Do you know the procedure to do so?"

Zeno tilted his head in confusion. "I thought it was as simple as just shouting it out."

"Feh! That does work, but that is the quickest way for Uslo to ensure you do not survive to fulfill it, or survive the challenge itself."

Zeno's eyes widened at that. "You mean heâ€¦".

"There is no proof, young Zeno, but it is suspected among many that all previous challenges were fixed in some shape or form, to ensure Ley continued his rule."

"Ughâ€¦since when has this keep been filled with traitorous San'Shyuum?" Zeno growled in frustration. What was this keep becoming?

"Fret not, Zeno, I know of another wayâ€¦a moreâ€¦secretive way."

Zeno raised an eye ridge in interest. "I am listening."

"Have you heard of a _ves__'__ti_?"

He had to think about that for a moment. "It is a blade with a secret compartment in the hilt, used as a means of transferring written messages in secret."

"Yes and it can be used to challenge the kaidon without revealing your identity," Koro told him. "The problem is twofold: one is getting the blade _to_ the kaidon."

"I think I know of a way," Zeno said, remembering the secret tunnels: one did indeed go right up to the Master Room. "What is the other issue?"

"Getting one in the first place," Koro said. "Uslo had thought of this angle and had forbidden the merchants to sell any. However, I think I know of one that may still have a couple hidden in his warehouseâ€¦".

* * *

><p>The next dayâ€|

Zeno was very happy he had run into Koro. The herdmaster not only gave him important intel, but allowed him to sleep in his quarters and provided him with food. No longer did he have to risk stealing food, or sleep in locations that were questionable in terms of safety. Yet, a part of him urged caution: while Koro had yet to give any indication he was playing Zeno for a fool, Zeno knew he had to be on his guard at all times.

The big test would be when he entered the warehouse Koro told him about: it would be the perfect place for an trap. With that in mind, Zeno had all his senses on alert and kept an eye on his motion tracker as he slipped through the open warehouse doors, his camo active as always. His caution was well deserved, for he immediately spotted a couple of keep guards.

They were a few feet ahead, talking to the merchant that controlled the warehouse. It sounded like they were discussing the status of an order: neither guard sounded pleased that their merchandise had not arrived yet. "This shipment was supposed to be in this morning. Captain Uslo _needs_ those weapons, serf!" one of the guards growled.

"I told you," the merchant said helplessly. "I do not, cannot, control how long it takes for merchandise to come in. Take it up with the supplier! There is nothing I can do!"

The other guard grabbed the man by the shirt. "You know the price of failure, serf!" he hissed.

"No, please! I told youâ€|it is out of my control!"

Zeno was unable to stand by and watch this. Knowing he risked exposing himself, he rushed forward, grabbed both guards by the back of the heads and bashed their heads together. The guards slumped to the floor unconscious, the merchant released from their grip. "By the godsâ€|whatâ€|," the merchant gasped, unnerved at what just happened.

"You are welcome," Zeno said softly, but did not deactivate his camo.

"Wh-who are you?"

"I cannot risk revealing myself, and I require something from you, if you still have it. And quickly, before these two wake up."

"Why should I trust a man that will not reveal his face?"

"I require a _ves__'__ti_, is that answer enough?"

The merchant's face paled considerably. "Those are forbidden for me to sellâ€|"

"But are you really selling it since you never saw me?" Zeno said smoothly. "And if I am guessing correctly, you are not supposed to have any to begin with, so what difference would it make if I _borrowed_ one?"

"If you intend to use this for what I think you intend to use it for, then I would suffer a loss as it would be difficult to have it returned."

"If I succeed I will ensure you are compensated appropriately."

"And if you fail?"

Zeno sighed, really not wanting to think about it. "If I fail, then I believe we all have a lot more to worry about than the price of a single blade."

The merchant seemed to agree with that assessment.

* * *

><p>While the merchant retrieved the *ves* *'__ti*, Zeno arranged the two guards so it looked like their state of unconsciousness was due to an accident: that warehouses typically had precariously stacked crates worked well in his favor for this. He suggested the merchant close up shop and take a long vacation somewhere: Uslo would surely send more goons to wonder about the late shipment and next time Zeno wouldn't be there to save him. The merchant readily agreed.

With the *ves* *'__ti* now attached to his leg armor next to a kisan, Zeno set out to do his next task. After learning about the situation the rest of the Gi'vea in the keep was in, he wanted to see if he could help them in some way. One of the tunnels went under the Gi'vea house, so Zeno was hoping there was an exit point there. After entering the tunnel network from one of the useable entrances, turning off his camo and after turning on his heat lamps, Zeno found that these tunnels were indeed in ill repair.

The tunnel was full of vermin, debris from partial tunnel collapses and puddles of water that seeped in from either the river or the yearly rains. It also reeked, making Zeno nearly gag and cough: Lila neglected to tell him this little detail. Then again, the tunnels she was lead through were likely part of the mountain itself and less prone to this sort of decay.

The walk to where the Gi'vea house rested above did not take long. When he reached it, he was pleased to see that there was an entrance into the Gi'vea house itself. However, there were signs of recent use here: there was a pile of trash at the base of the ladder leading up into the house itself and the ladder itself looked fairly new. His curiosity piqued, he ascended the ladder and easily opened the secret door.

The moment he poked his head out though, he found a knife at his neck.

Not __again, he thought, glancing up to see a high ranked Gi'vea sitting by the access hatch.

"A SpecOps," she said, her tone guarded. "Are you one of Uslo's assassins?"

"I assure you, ma'dam, that I do not work for Uslo, for he has drawn

my ire for the sins he has committed against the noble Gi'vea," Zeno said quickly. Glancing around, he saw other Gi'vea of various ranks and positions, all watching him warily.

Fortunately for him, the Gi'vea holding the knife relaxed. "Then what is your purpose here, SpecOps, if not to spy for Uslo?"

"I heard of your plight from my sister, a fellow Gi'vea," Zeno explained. "And heard further details from Herdmaster Koro. I came here to see if I could be of any assistance."

"There is only one of this House that has managed to escape this shameful situation," a familiar voice said. Zeno looked up to see the headmistress of the house approaching, whom he looked even older now than when he last saw her, years ago on High Charity. "And only one that has a brother that is so concerned of her wellbeing. Zeno is that you?"

"It is indeed, headmistress," Zeno confirmed, climbing into the house completely so he could take off his helmet.

"You risk your life coming here," the headmistress said softly. "Uslo has ordered for your death, the rumors say."

"A fact I am aware of, for his minions have already made an attempt upon my life, along with trying to force Lila to return with them." Zeno smiled as he added. "One of them will never return to this keep."

"If it was one of those that follows Uslo with a similar blackness in his hearts, then I am glad. Many only follow him out of fear."

"A fact I hope to change."

The headmistress looked down at his waist and spotted the ves' ti. "I see," she said. "You know what you face."

"I do."

"Though your chances are slim, you are likely the keeps last best hope at redemption," the headmistress said sadly. "You have our blessing, Zeno. May the gods give you strength and your blade swift and precise."

"Thank you, headmistress." Zeno bowed his head gratefully and respectfully. "But what of you and the rest of the Gi'vea? If I fail."

"Do not worry about us," the headmistress said with a smile. "A mysterious benefactor has been providing us with food, water and other supplies daily since this 'house arrest' has started, using the secret entrance you arrived in. Should things not improve, I am certain this benefactor will find a way to smuggle us out of the keep. We will find a more honorable keep then to reestablish our house."

Much like some one did with Lila, if it is not the same person, Zeno thought. "This is a weight off my hearts, headmistress," he said. "One less thing on my mind when the time comes. On my honor, I will do my best to set things right

again."

"I know you will, Zenoâ€|blood of Kou."

* * *

><p>AN:** Just a few clarifications on 'alien' words/phrases shown in this chap.

Agyat = sangheili equivalent of cattle, though I envision them to be more like bison.

Ma'esi = sangheili equivalent of horses

_Och, __Och._ _Ya__'__kada_ = "calm, calm, no harm will come" is the rough translation

BTW, has anyone else noticed that the document editor on here likes to eat the spaces between italicized words lately? So annoying...

8. Challenges

__**Authors**__**Note:**_Hope everyone had a good Thanksgiving!

Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Chapter 7: Challenges

Zeno spent the rest of the day exploring the tunnel network itself. Much of what he explored was largely intact, despite length of time without maintenance. There were areas that were impassable and others that looked too unstable to risk traveling through: he made note of all this in his HUD. The good thing, and the purpose of this exploration, was that all the exit points he will need to use were accessible: the Master Room, the Stone Hall and the Arena.

He did spend some time listening in to a debate between the elders in the Stone Hall. From the sound of things, they hated the direction things were going, but felt helpless to do anything. What worried Zeno more though was that he heard only four distinct voices. Either the rest of the elders were not present, had nothing to say, orâ€|they only had four elders left: he suspected the latter and that Ley or Uslo was the cause of that.

By the time the second sun started to set, Zeno was back in Koro's private quarters. There he started cleaning his armor and checking its functions. Koro returned home from his duties while in the midst of this process.

"What is that stench?" the herdmaster said.

"I was exploring some tunnels," Zeno said, looking up at him briefly.

"Which were in less than ideal condition in some areas."

"You are fortunate my duties leave me less than pleasant smelling myself, Zeno," Koro grumbled. "Otherwise you risk giving yourself away by smell alone."

"Which is why I am cleaning my armor now, so it does not stink next time I am running around."

"A smart thing, though I do hope you did other things besides running around in tunnels. Such as obtaining a _ves__'__ti_â€|."

Zeno smoothly produced said blade and placed it on the table. "I arrived at the warehouse you directed me to just in time: a couple of Uslo's minions were about to slay the merchant for not getting their shipment in on time."

"You were forced to reveal yourself?" Koro asked, looking concerned.

"Nay, I was able to subdue them without showing my face and I made it look like a crate had fallen on their heads. I advised the merchant to take a long vacation though, once he gave me the blade."

The herdmaster nodded. "With luck, Uslo will kill those two for their failure first before going after the merchant again. Did you find out anything else?"

"The Gi'vea will be fine for the time being," Zeno told him. "Someone is slipping them supplies in secret. I was also able to listen in on a session with the elders, though they did not say anything I did not already know. I do worry though, about the elders themselves: I only heard four voices."

"Alas, the moreâ€|_out spoken_ of the elders have wound up dead over the years," Koro confirmed. "Those that remain wisely keep their mouths shut when they suspect the kaidon or one of Uslo's minions may be within earshot."

"I am surprised no one has stepped up to replace them."

"Considering the circumstances the other elders have died, few were brave enough to do so."

"Cowards."

"Perhaps, but sometimes it is better to be a coward in order to assist in a greater cause with more support later on, than to be brave and get yourself killed alone."

"And yet, sometimes your best chance to change something is to go at it aloneâ€|," Zeno muttered.

"Indeedâ€|." A moment of silence passed between them. "When are you going to announce your challenge?"

"Tomorrow, when I am certain Uslo is not with the kaidon," Zeno replied softly. "I intend to have the challenge itself be the day after, at Urs' zenith."

"It is good to hear you will attempt to delay Uslo's knowledge of the challenge," Koro said. "But why wait until the next day for the challenge itself? Surely that will give the kaidon time to inform Uslo himself and thus increase the risk of Uslo interfering."

"A buffer," Zeno explained. "For I have no idea how long I will have to wait in order to 'announce' the challenge to the kaidon when he is alone. I also desire to inform at least one of elders of the challenge myself, so the buffer is needed for that as well."

"But you have no idea if any of the elders are on Uslo's side?"

"From the eaves dropping I did earlier today, it did not sound like any of them were."

"Just how did you eaves drop on them in the first place?" Koro blinked then said. "Wait, you mentioned earlier you were 'exploring some tunnels'. What tunnels?"

"I'm afraid I must keep that to myself, for now," Zeno said slyly. "Let us just say that as a member of a reconnaissance unit, I have my ways of finding out secrets."

"Bah, SpecOps and their sneaky ways."

Zeno just grinned at him.

* * *

><p>The next day.

Zeno set out first thing, wanting to get the challenge made as soon as possible. He spent some time waiting outside the main keep, waiting for Uslo to emerge. After a couple of hours, the captain of the keep guard did emerge and started his rounds: it was then Zeno descended into the tunnel network.

He made his way quickly to the Master room, hoping Ley would still be in there. As he came up beside the secret door, he heard voices within:

"Kaidon," a voice Zeno recognized as one of the elders said. "Word of the blockade has been circulating around the serfs. They worry a war may erupt, a war we are not prepared for."

"Their worries are unfounded," Ley's unmistakable voice replied. "The State of Hilvum is a peaceful one, passive even: they would not be easily provoked into bloodshed."

"It is not the Hilvums I worry about," the elder persisted. "By now, word of this has surely reached the ears of other keeps. They may get similar ideas, even attack us while the majority of our forces are away on this silly errand of Uslo's."

"Uslo knows what he is doing."

"Does he? He seems mad with power."

"Enough!" Ley snapped, making Zeno draw away from the door. "I will

hear no more!"

"Are you so blind thatâ€¦" There was the sound of someone being struck.

"Still your tongue before you lose it like other elders have before you," Ley growled warningly. "Be gone from my sight!"

"Yesâ€¦kaidonâ€¦," the elder grumbled darkly.

Zeno listened for the elder to leave and then waited a bit more for Ley to move away from the secret door's location. He made sure his heat lamps were off before finding and activating the switch for the door. With bated breath, he prayed the door did not make much noise, though he had his doubts. To his immense shock, the door opened soundlessly, like it had been recently undergone maintenance. As a double bonus, there was a large tapestry hanging right in front of the opening, concealing the door. Cautiously, he pulled a bit of the tapestry aside and peered into the Master room itself.

Relatively few Sangheili got to see the inside of this room, mostly elders, guards, serfs assigned to cleaning it, and of course the kaidon himself. Zeno was one of the very few that was none of those that had seen the inside of this room, thanks to Kou, many years ago, and what he saw was not much different from what he remembered. As far as he could tell, only the tapestry he was currently hiding behind was really _new._

Silently he checked to ensure the _ves_'__ti_ was still attached to his hip: Koro helped him write the message of challenge last night. Said message was safely hidden away in the blades hidden compartment. Now all he had to do was deliver the knife so Ley saw it first. He scanned quickly and spotted the kaidon's shadow emanating from the balcony. With a wary eye on the main entrance to the room, Zeno slipped out from the tunnel and behind the tapestry, hoping to get a better angle. If he threw the _ves_'__ti_ right, Ley will think it came from somewhere outside, but he did not have the confidence in his throwing skill like he did with his melee. Thinking he had a good shot, he prepared to throw.

Suddenly the kaidon's shadow moved and Zeno froze as Ley walked back into the room itself. The look of worry on Ley's face gave him pause: what the hell was _he_ worried about? Zeno shook his head, reminding himself on why he was there. Ley's back was to him, and he felt the brief temptation to just drive the blade into Ley's unprotected back. _That __would __be __the __coward__'__s __way __of __doing __it,__ he told himself. So with a mental sigh he made his shot.

The blade sang through the air with the grace its design was made for, but its landing was less than graceful. It slapped against the balcony threshold hilt first and landed on the floor with a clatter. Zeno nearly grunted a curse out loud: the obvious lack of skill in throwing the blade may count against him on whether Ley would heed the challenge or not. Still, regardless of how clumsy the message was delivered, it still got Ley's attention.

Zeno watched Ley approach the knife, his eyes wide in recognition. Before picking up the blade, Ley looked around outside on the balcony: it appeared the clumsiness of the throw proved to be more

beneficial to him in this area at least. As Ley picked up the knife and opened the hidden compartment, Zeno edged back to the secret passage. Just as he slipped back into the tunnels and started to close the door, he heard the words, in a soft voice, he was both hoping and dreading to here.

"I accept your challenge."

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Zeno headed for the Stone Hall next, hoping the elder Ley struck was heading there to gripe to his fellow elders. Hopefully, with a bit of patience and luck, he can get this particular elder alone, for after what he heard, he sounded like he would be the most receptive of the news Zeno held. The problem though, was that he has been having a lot of _luck_ as of late and he knew it would run out sooner or later.

Once he was at the appropriate exit, he listened carefully. He didn't hear any arguing, or calm conversation, but he thought he heard some muttering. Deciding to take a chance, he active the secret doorâ€|

â€|to be greeted by another tapestry.

_This __was__ ' __not__' __here __when __I __was __a __kid,__ Zeno thought. Granted that was many years ago, but he was certain most keeps did not decorate these halls: the saga of the keep was the only 'dÃ©cor' usually allowed. Someone had to be going around putting these things over the secret doors, to help keep the person that is using them safe. It was likely the same man that rescued Lila: he made a mental note to find out who he was and thank him, provided he won the duel tomorrow.

Like before, he carefully pulled part of the tapestry aside and looked around. There was, indeed, an elder in here and it looked like he was refreshing himself on the keep saga. From the developing bruise on his face, he had to be the same elder he heard in the Master Room before, what luck! Zeno doubled checked to ensure there were no guards before stepping out into the Stone Hall itself.

Now, how to approach the elder, whom was still engrossed in the saga. He decided just talk to him. "Why so glum, elder?" he asked, altering his voice to keep the man from recognizing him by voice alone.

The elder didn't even glance back as he responded. "I fear our keep is in its last days," he said softly. "So I thought to read our saga one last time and remember the good times, when there was honor in the keep." Only now did he turn around to address him face to face and his eyes widened when he saw no one there. "What? Am I hearing things now?"

"Oh no, I am really here," Zeno said stepping closer.

The elder must have caught sight of the brief distortion when he moved, for his eyes were now very wide indeed. "Who are you!" he cried.

Zeno winced at the volume of his voice. "Keep your voice down, elder. You risk ruining everything I seek to accomplish," Zeno said with a

faint snarl. "And I cannot risk revealing myself, not yet at least."

"Are you an assassin, here to take my life?" the elder asked in a whisper.

"Nay, elder, while my goal is to hope to take a life, it is not yours. I am here to give you a message."

"What message would that be?"

"I have challenged the kaidon. The duel will be tomorrow at Urs' zenith. I trust you can pass this message on to your fellow eldersâ€|and only your fellow elders: Uslo must not know of this."

"So, you suspect Uslo's interference in past duels as we do," the elder said. "Still, you go to your likely death."

"I am aware of that," Zeno said softly. "But I must try, for the sake of the keep and our people."

"An honorable goalâ€|one we have not had in some time."

"I best be going," Zeno said. "Keep reading the saga, elderâ€|for if I fail, your suspicions may very well come true."

"I wish you luck then, warrior. You will need it."

The elder turned back toward the saga and Zeno slipped back into the secret tunnel, closing the door behind him.

* * *

><p>With his goals of the day accomplished, Zeno returned to Koro's residence. A part of him wanted to continue wandering the keep, listening on gossip for more intel that may be useful to him, but he opted not to take the risk. He had taken many risks as is already and he did not want to tempt fate any more than what he already had. So he planned on staying in the house until it came time to go to the duel itself.<p>

The problem with sitting around doing little to nothing though, was that it left one's mind to wander in directions he didn't want it to. He kept thinking about Sani and how little time they had been together. With only the duel itself to worry about now, Zeno started feeling how much he missed Sani that much more. When he sat down to eat after Koro returned, he found he had little appetite and thus had difficulty eating at all. Koro noticed.

"What is on your mind?" the herdmaster asked.

"A lot of things," Zeno said softly.

"Well if it was one of them, I have heard no whispers about the challenge happening tomorrow."

Zeno managed a weak chuckle. "Thanks, but that was not one of them."

"Care to enlighten me then? Perhaps voicing it will help ease your mind."

He hesitated: Zeno did not know what Koro thought about _semos_. "I worry...", he began, deciding to play it safe. "About the ones I love I am likely about to leave behind."

"I am assuming your sister is one of them." Zeno nodded. "The other?"

"My mate, whom I only recently bonded to."

"Ahâ€¦I see. A new relationship, so fresh and new, makes having to go do what you are doing that much harder to deal with compared to a couple that has had the time to bond. But at the same time, a new relationship can be easier to move on from if one is lost compared to one that has existed for many years."

There was truth in those words: after all, it took him _years_ to finally move on after Miko's death. "I also worry that I am about to throw my life away for nothing," Zeno said. "I have already concluded that failing and doing nothing at all would result in the same outcome."

"You do not know that," Koro said.

"What makes you say that?"

"If you fail, there is a chance your attempt may awaken the kaidon to his wrongs and attempt to reverse the damage himself. There is also a chance the local populous may be inspired to revolt when they hear the truth of what is going on."

"Forgive me, but considering how tightly Uslo has this place controlled, I doubt a rebellion will have a chance for a foothold."

"But does Uslo have as tight a grip as you say?" Koro challenged. "After all, you have been able to get around and do your preliminary objectives with little difficulty."

"Only due to my training as reconnaissance, my active camo and the knowledge of lost tunnels," Zeno countered. "Easily seventy-five percent of the populous here do not have that kind of advantage training and equipment wise. Those that may have the training and equipment, are either under Uslo's thumb or do not care about what is going on."

"And you are so certain about that? Or are you just basing this on what you went through as a child? There is more going on here than what you think, _especially_ since you arrived here."

"What are youâ€¦|" Zeno quieted when Koro held up a hand and looked at the door.

"_Hide_!" Koro hissed. "And do not reveal yourself for any reason!"

Zeno quickly popped on his helmet and activated his camo while Koro hid the extra set of dishes on the table. As an extra precaution,

Zeno went up into the rafters of the house: the wooden beams creaked a bit, but held his weight. Just in time too, for the door was kicked in and three armed guards came in: one of them was Uslo.

"What is the meaning of this!" Koro growled. "Barging in to my home!"

"Silence, you old fool," Uslo sneered. "You are in no position to complain."

"What are you talking about?" Koro hissed. "I have done nothing but do my duties."

"Your stance on how things are being run is not unknown, herdmaster," Uslo said. "I have witnesses that state you were openly grumbling about the kaidon and me."

"So I am not entitled to have my opinion? It is impossible to please everyone you know."

"Oh having an opinion is not a crime," Uslo said slyly. "But when said opinion runs the risk of starting a rebellion that is another matter."

"You read too much into things, Uslo," Koro growled lowly.

"Do I?" Uslo gave him a cocky, smug grin. "I prefer to see it as stopping a costly revolt before it starts. Take him."

Zeno watched helplessly as the other two guards approached Koro and grabbed him by the arms. Koro started to struggle, but Uslo brought a spear up to his good eye. "Now, now, you do not want to lose your _other_ eye now do you?" Uslo said with that cocky grin again.

"What are you going to do with me? Take my life?"

"You do not deserve death," Uslo said lowly. "No, I will have you spend some time in the dungeon with other Sangheili that are also unsatisfied with things. Consider yourself privileged I am going to let you live long enough to see the new era our keep is about to enter."

"If it is what I think it is, Uslo, you are a _fool_!" Koro snapped. "Your risk," Koro's protest was cut short when Uslo hit him hard in the head. The old herdmaster was nearly knocked unconscious and he looked around, confused.

"No, you are the fool," Uslo growled, lifting up his head. "Soon, very soon, things will change drastically around here. Out with the old in with the new, so to speak." Uslo let go of Koro's head and looked at the other guards. "Come, we are done here."

Zeno watched as Uslo and the two guards half-dragged Koro out of the house, wishing he could stop them, but knew he would ruin his own chances if he did so. Uslo's words also bothered him and he stayed up in the rafters mulling them over for nearly an hour before finally dropping back down to the floor. _Out _with _the _old, _in _with _the _new, _he _said, _ Zeno thought. _Does _he _mean _to _eliminate _all _of _the _old _traditions? _Or _something _else? _That Uslo was planning something big, whether it was

conquest or not, was pretty much confirmed.

Now though, he had another problem: Uslo had taken away one of his means of support on the eve of the challenge when he needed it the most. He needed a place to sleep without having to keep one eye open and this place was no longer safe. With a sigh, he left the herdmaster's residence and headed for one of the tunnel entrances.

There was only one other place he knew he had support and safetyâ€¦|.

9. No Going Back

__Authors**__****__**Note:**_**Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 8: No Going Back

Next morning, State of Hilvum

Sani sighed as he looked out the window, the morning colors of the sky just starting to fade into full daylight. Never before had he felt so lonely and empty, so sick with worry. He was finding hard to eat, sleepâ€¦|anything really. Absently, he rubbed his right forearm, where this 'marriage' tattoo lay. The design is supposed to mean infinity, forever basically. A silly notion since no one lives forever, but now it seemed especially so, as Zeno was not likely to ever return. Was this whole 'marriage' thing a waste of their time: a symbolic gesture that lost its meaning far too soon?

"Sani," Lila's voice said. "Are you alright?"

"Of course not," he replied, rather bitterly. "Who would be when the love of their life ran off on a fool's errand?"

There was a sigh and out of the corner of his eye he saw Lila join him at the window. "You know him, Sani, likely better than even I. You know he could not leave this to pass without trying to do something about it."

"It is not that, Lila, it is the stakes against him." Sani sighed himself and turned toward her. "My hearts aches terribly with the knowledge that I am likely to never see him again. We have been together for so short a timeâ€¦|."

"I know things look dire, Sani, but we must have faith. Zeno has been through much in his life, been in situations that were just as dangerous and he pulled through."

"I knowâ€¦|I just wishâ€¦|I could help him somehowâ€¦|to improve his chances."

"This is something he has to do on his own, Sani," Lila reminded him. "Not to mention, word of your relationship with him is wide spread. If you had gone with him, someone recognizing you would have blown his cover."

She was right of course, though Sani hated to admit it. With another sigh he looked back out the window, noting that there was a rare faint 'mist' of ice crystals over the fields. As the triple suns rose, these would quickly melt, but for the time being they produced a beautiful 'ice rainbow' at certain angles. He wished Zeno could see this.

Overwhelmed by both the beauty of the scene before him and despair for the one he loved, he started weeping, lowering his head to the sill as he did so. He felt Lila embrace him, hoping to comfort him. Her hands were warm, but not as warm as Zeno's. He doubted anyone's would be as warm as his and this likelihood just made him weep harder.

After a moment he lifted his head to look out onto the fields again. The ice crystals were already starting to melt away, but something else caught his eye. Something was disturbing the mist of ice crystals, no, it was multiple things. He squinted and tried to focus on them only to widen them again when he realized what it was: active camo.

The Ribal blockade had turned into an invasionâ€|.

* * *

><p>State of Ribal

Despite their situation and limited resources, the Gi'vea were very generous to him.

Usually the Gi'vea would flat out refuse any male who requested to sleep in the House overnight. However, these were unusual and even dangerous times, so they allowed Zeno to sleep in one of the counseling rooms. They even let him sleep in a bit before rousing him a few hours before the challenge was to start.

He ate lightly, both for his own sake and to not take up more of the limited resources than the Gi'vea had. One of them gave him a massage, which helped to loosen up muscles that had been tense since he arrived here. After that, while he did a final check of his equipment, they spoke to him, giving him an means to voice any last worries and concerns, though they all knew there was little they could do to alleviate those things beyond words of encouragement.

A part of Zeno wanted to stay here and soak up the Gi'vea's generosity for even longer, but he knew that was out of fear of what was to come. Fear he could not afford now. With a bit of effort, he put all his worries and concerns out of his mind and focused on the task ahead. He thanked the Gi'vea for their help and once again descended into the tunnel network.

Fear was like a specter hovering just outside his field of vision: disappearing when he tried try to focus on it, but always there, lurking in the shadows of his mind. It seemed to dance around him, tempting and taunting him, never allowing itself to be banished

completely. All Zeno could do was ignore it and focus on the battle ahead and reminding himself why he was doing this. Still the fear grew and it was at its strongest when he reached the exit that would lead directly into the Arena.

He stood there for several minutes, staring at the door, his body unwilling to move to open it. With time running short, he finally mastered his fear and accepted whatever fate that was to come to him. He breathed a long sigh of resignation as he activated the door, the stone moving aside almost soundlessly. Zeno activated his camo and slipped out from behind the expected tapestry that concealed the door and this time, he activated the means to close the door.

Zeno had been in the Arena a few times in his life and it still looked impressive to him, even now. Massive stone walls surrounded a large circular 'pit' fifty feet in diameter where the combatants fought. The pit itself was sunken into the ground about one meter, with two short stairways on either side. The bottom covered with sand: to soak up the blood, they say. Along the main walls were observation seats, where spectators that had a vested interest in the battle, in this case it would be the elders, could watch. Besides the secret door Zeno just used, there was only one entrance into the Arena: supposedly to keep cowards backing out on their challenges from easily escaping.

It looked like he was the first one here, as he saw no one else. That quickly changed though with the arrival of the elders, whom quickly went and sat in one row of observation seats. They were muttering to themselves, but Zeno was not close enough to hear their conversation: likely speculation on who the challenger was. _They __will __know, __soon __enough,_ Zeno thought grimly.

Moments later the kaidon, Ley, arrived, dressed in traditional Sangheili armor. He had a perplexed look on his face that did not match the intimidating armor he wore. "Noble elders," Ley said. "I was about to summon you here myself, only to discover that another has done so for me. Tell me, who was it that did this?"

Zeno knew then that it was time to reveal himself. "That would be me," he said, stepping forward, deactivating his camo as he did so. The look on Ley's face, and the elders for that matter, was of shock.

"Who is he!" one of the elders demanded. "Is he even a Ribal!"

"Of course he is you fool!" Ley snapped once he recovered. "I know that voiceâ€|that _armor_. Zenoâ€|Why have you returned?"

"Why do you think, Ley?" Zeno growled. Whatever fear he had was now gone, replaced by anger. Anger at what Ley did and denied him as a child, what he did and tried to do to Kou and other things. He was careful to temper this anger though, for he knew that letting his emotions control this battle would only quicken his death. "You and your pet Uslo are leading this keep to destruction. Kou would be spinning his grave at what you are doing!"

Ley visibly flinched at the mention of Kou's name. "You know _nothing_ about what is going on here," he said.

"I know enough, you hypocrite!" Zeno countered. "Lila told me

everything!"

"So I seeâ€|but even she does not know all that is going on," Ley said as he stepped into the pit. "Not that it matters now. Do you really think you have the skill to take me out, Zeno?"

"As I told one of your cronies that tried to kill me a few days ago," Zeno said as he jumped into the pit himself. "I did not get into the SpecOps due to my good looks. I am not the untrained youth you berated and scorned all those years ago."

"I will be the judge of that," Ley growled as he ignited his pair of kisans. "Come at me, Zeno. Let us see how much you have really learned!"

With a roar, Zeno ignited his own kisans and chargedâ€|.

* * *

><p>His head hurt.<p>

That was the first thing that came to mind as consciousness returned to him. The next thing he became aware of was the soft humming vibration of a cool metal floor underneath him. It was familiar, so were other sounds that he heard. He also realized his hands were bound. After a moment it all clicked into place. Sani opened his eyes and confirmed where he was: the passenger bay of a phantom.

"Humph, this one finally woke up," a gruff voice growled. Sani looked up to see the face of Ribal warrior looking down at him. "Why did we have to bother bringing this weakling too?"

"To ensure the Gi'vea behaved herself," another Ribal said. "It would have been a shame to bruise such a pretty faceâ€|"

"Bahâ€|sure a pretty face, but she fights like a demon!" a third grumbled. "My groin still tingles from that kick she gave meâ€|."

He remembered now. The Ribals had sent a squad of cloaked warriors to capture Lila and himself. He had managed to kill two of them at range with plasma pistol before they got too close. To his shame, he was quickly overwhelmed and rendered unconscious. Looking around, he counted only four warriors guarding them: he recalled seeing eight before he lost consciousness, which meant they lost more to the responding _Tal_ before they escaped.

"Saniâ€|." He turned to see Lila sitting on the floor across from him. "Are you alright?"

"I have a minor headacheâ€|." He moved his limbs and found them to be intact. "But other than that, I think I am fine."

"If you do not be quiet, you will have more to worry about," one of the warriors sneered.

"You would risk losing honor by harming someone that is unarmed and helpless?" Sani retorted. "That isâ€|if your keep _has_ any honor leftâ€|."

"Why you little!" The warrior moved to kick him, but another held him

back.

"Enough! He has a point," the other warrior said. "There is no honor in attacking someone that cannot fight back."

"This whole operation is dishonorable," Lila hissed softly.

"Mind your mouth, Gi'vea. What does a female know of honor?"

"More than you do, apparently," Sani retorted.

"Shut up weakling!"

"Weak, am I?" Sani growled. "I killed two of your fellows before you reached us and that was before you decloaked. That you had to use camo to get close to us in the first place!" He left the statement hanging.

"Why you!"

"Enough!" the forth warrior, apparently the leader of the squad, barked. "We are about to land. Let Uslo decide what to do with him."

Of course, they were being taken to the Ribal keep. While Sani's hearts soared at the chance of seeing Zeno again, he also dreaded how he would see him. For all he knew, Zeno could have already made his attempt and be laying dead in some unmarked grave. Worse, Zeno could still be gathering information and allies and hear of this: he would most likely drop everything to free them and ruin his chances. He dare not voice any question that may reveal Zeno's location, however.

The phantom landed a moment later and the warriors forced them down the grav lift. At the bottom, a Sangheili warrior in captains armor was waiting for them: it had to be Uslo.

"Who is this?" Uslo said, pointing at Sani. "He is not who I asked you to get. And where are the rest of you? I sent eight to do this mission."

"The Gi'vea seemed fond of this one," the squad leader said. "So we brought him along to ensure her compliance. As for my squad, we unfortunately suffered casualties during the main phase."

"To be expected, what with his suspected skill," Uslo mused. "I take it you won in the end?"

"Actually, sir!" The squad leader looked nervous. "We determined that Zeno was not even in the Hilvum state at the time of our attack."

"What?" Uslo snapped. He then looked pointedly at Sani and Lila. "Where is he? Tell me!"

"On a mission," Lila said vaguely.

"To where and what is this mission?"

"He is SpecOps," Sani replied, playing along. "Do you honestly think

we would be prudent to know that kind of information?"

Uslo grinded his mandibles together in evident frustration, but then his mood brightened. "No matter. Soon enough he will hear that we have his sister again and he will come runningâ€¦to his death."

At least now Sani knew for certain Zeno wasn't dead yet. It was only a small comfort though. Things suddenly changed though when a keep guard ran up to them, an urgent look on his face. "Captain! The kaidon has been challenged!" the man said.

At this Uslo became furious. "What! When!" he demanded. "By who!"

"I do know when the challenge was officially made, but it is going on _right _now!_"

"Who damn you!" Uslo grabbed the man and shook him.

"I do not know! Some SpecOps guy!"

Uslo froze and Sani glanced at Lila, whom looked at him. Around them it got very quiet as it dawned on everyone around who it was that challenged the kaidon. Uslo finally turned back toward them, his face at first unreadable, but then slowly transformed into a malicious grin that sent a chill down Sani's spine.

"Soâ€¦this is his mission then," Uslo said with a chuckle. "Hmmâ€¦A bit sooner than I wanted, but this will be _perfect_ regardless." He looked at the squad leader. "Take them and follow me. The rest of you return to the blockade. Soon the Hilvums will pay for their resistance. In the meantime, let us see how your dear Zeno is faring against the kaidonâ€¦."

As the squad leader pushed them forward, Sani fell into despair. The last thing he wanted was to actually witness Zeno's deathâ€¦.

* * *

><p>Meanwhileâ€¦

Zeno panted heavily a couple of times, catching his breath and as he glared at Ley on the other side of the dueling pit. So far, neither had broken through the other's defenses, but unlike him, Ley didn't seem to be even winded. He realized that if he was to have a chance, he would have to pace himself, else he would end up too exhausted to fight and be easily slain. That he was not allowed to use his shield systems during this battle did not help any.

"You have an interesting style, Zeno," Ley commented. "Acrobatic, fast and, unfortunately, high-energy. You will not last much longer like this, pity you never learned the _proper_ way to use kisans."

"Gee, I wonder why _that_ is?" Zeno snapped. "You denied it to me, so I had to improvise."

"Yesâ€¦and that improvisation may cost you in the end."

"Shut up, Ley: this is a duel to the death, not a training session."

"Yesâ€¦you are right about that." At that Ley rushed forward. Zeno went on the defensive, fending off a flurry of blows. A couple got through, resulting in minor cuts on his arms and legs. "Your defense needs work," Ley said with a smirk, backing off a couple of paces. "But at least you held your ground. I remember that one time; you were backing away like a little cowardâ€¦".

"I remember that day all too well," Zeno growled. "That scar you gave me still aches from time to time." Ley seemed to be toying with him: it was like he was not taking this fight seriously and it was starting to annoy Zeno. He decided to try something similar to what he did with Koni. When Ley started to come at him again, he backed away until he was almost at the low wall of the pit. Then, he jumped against that wall and propelled himself off it, sending him sailing over Ley.

He twisted as he flew, his blades slicing downward. Ley was not completely prepared for such a move, but was able to twist mostly out of the way, resulting in Zeno's blades only scoring his back armor. What came next though, Zeno nearly lost his head from.

Ley was still twisting around when Zeno landed and as Zeno turned to face him, he saw a blade coming right for his head. Instinctively, Zeno stepped back and turned his head to the side, but not quite far enough. Ley's blade sliced through his helmet and cut into his right brow ridge. The cut followed his brow ridge almost all the way down to his ear hole.

"Argh!" Zeno danced back, away from Ley. He had to resist dropping a sword to pull off his helmet to inspect the wound.

"Reckless!" Ley chided. "You do not use a tactic like that unless you are willing to give your life away! One of us needs to walk away from this!"

"Why the fuck do you care?" Zeno snapped. "I already know you can kill me easily, so stop holding back already!"

'If you are so certain you will die, why did you challenge me?"

"Again, why do you care? You have wanted me dead for years and now that you have your chance, and with Kou no longer here to interfere in fact, you are holding back."

"So you desire to just throw your life away?"

"Of course not!"

"Then what do you fight for?"

All this talk was getting on his nerves. "None of your business, Ley!" he roared as he charged. "All you need to know is that I want you dead!"

Zeno gave it all he had over the next several minutes. He succeeded in opening a couple of minor wounds on Ley, but it was not enough. When their swords became locked at one point, Ley suddenly threw his arms open, forcing Zeno's blades wide. No! Zeno knew what was

coming and he tried to bring a blade back quick enough to blow the coming blow, but he was not quick enough. Ley slashed him across the chest with an upward slash, the blade cutting through his armor and into his flesh. Zeno gasped at the pain, but didn't have time to do much besides that due to the round house kick to the face he got next.

He fell to the arena floor, tumbling a couple of times before falling still. His swords, he hadn't a clue where they went flying. He just knew they were no longer in his hands. Above, he heard the elders moan in disappointment and despair, for they knew it was over. Ley, however, didn't seem to agree with that.

"Get up, Zeno," Ley barked. "Get _up_!"

_What__is__the__point?_ Zeno thought as he struggled to rise. _I__have__no__weapon._ No, wait, he _did_ have a weapon. He just had to wait for the right moment.

Zeno got it a moment later, when Ley approached him. "Get up you fool!" he hissed, leaning over him. "Do not tell me you have given up already!"

"Of course not," Zeno snarled as he made his move. He flipped over, using that momentum to add more power to his swing. At the last moment he activated the energy dagger on that hand: Ley, caught by surprise could not evade the blow. However due to the bad position and angle, Zeno missed a killing blow, the blade instead stabbing Ley in the right shoulder.

"Ugh!" Ley cried, staggering back. He stared at the wound for a moment before giving Zeno a small smile. "Good," he said. "Very good. There is still a fire in your heart, a will to live."

"I am notâ€|going to lay down and die for you," Zeno said as he struggled to his feet. "I may be a dead manâ€|but I am not going to die easily!" Gods his chest burned like fire and it was a bit hard to breathe.

"I would not want it any other wayâ€|. "

Before he could react, Ley was on him again. Strangely enough, he did not use his swords this time, said blades were deactivated and on his hips once more. Not that it mattered, for the elder Sangheili easily slipped behind him and got him in a choke hold.

"What do you fight for?" Ley growled in his ear, ripping off Zeno's helmet with his free hand. Without his helmet, he could not access his armor systems, including the energy daggers: he was helpless.

"Why do you care?" Zeno gasped, trying to pry Ley's arm from around his neck. "End it already!"

"I will not until you answer me!" Ley insisted. "What are you fighting for!"

Zeno knew that not answering would likely result in his death anyway, so he relented. "I fight for Sanghelios," he replied.

"For Sanghelios?" Ley echoed mockingly. "Are you a fool? You fight for those that largely despise you for what you are?"

"So long as there are Sangheili out there that respect me for what and who I am," Zeno said softly. "It is worth fighting for. I give my life for those that I love and respect, to try to protect them from the follies of this keep."

He fight Ley's grip tighten. "Name them," Ley demanded.

"Rtas, the Arbiter, the Gi'vum, Henun, Sefo, Lila, Herdmaster Koro, the Hilvumsâ€¦." He was running out of air and he was only just barely gasped out the last name. "Saniâ€¦." _I __am __sorry, __Sani__â€¦_,_ he thought, tears in his eyes as his vision started to go dark. _I __failed __you__â€¦_|__I __failed __everyone__â€¦|__._

* * *

><p>AN:**Only two more chaps and a commentary to go!

10. Ley's Confession

__**Authors**__ __**Note:**_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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* * *

><p>Chapter 9: Ley's Confession

Sani stumbled for the third time as he and Lila were forced to march into the main keep, his hearts heavy with dread. If Zeno was still alive, he would surely be distracted by his sudden appearance, causing him to be cut down right in front of him. Sani was certain that was what Uslo had in mind, since he had to yet remove that hideous grin off his face. Beside him, Lila looked equally worried. Of the two of them, her fate would be much worse: Sani knew he would likely simply be killed, while Lila would be forced into breeding with Uslo. _I __am __sorry, __Zeno_,_ he thought grimly. _It __looks __like __fate __does __not __want __me __to __keep __my __promise __to __you__â€¦|__._

At last they emerged into a large room, which Sani safely guessed was the challenge arena. After a quick glance he found the keep elders and the kaidon, whom was standing in the pit, but he could not see Zeno. A part of him hoped Zeno simply hadn't arrived yet, but he knew that could not be due to what the guard said earlier: his hearts started to sink. As they were forced further into the room, he saw a black and purple armored form laying against the side of the pit and his hearts sank completely when he realized it wasn't moving.

"No!" Sani cried, grief filling his hearts as he started to rush toward Zeno's body. However he was stopped in his tracks when pain erupted in his leg and he toppled over. Looking up and back, his vision slightly blurry from tears, he saw Uslo aiming a plasma pistol at him, a smug grin on his face.

"Now, now," Uslo said, grabbing him by his clothing and pulling him back toward the door. "No rushing off without my permission. Do not worry, you will be joining him soon enoughâ€¦".

"Fuckingâ€¦bastardâ€¦", Sani growled through tight mandibles. "Bastards the both of you!"

"Uslo," Ley growled, clearly not happy with the intrusion. "What are you doing here? This is not your business. And why are they with you?"

"Business that is clearly finished." Uslo stepped into the pit, glancing down at Zeno briefly before focusing on Ley once more. "However, my business is only just getting started."

"What are you on about?"

At that Uslo looked back at the warrior that came with them. "Bring the Gi'vea forward," he said. Sani watched helplessly as the warrior grabbed Lila and forced her toward him. Then, to everyone's surprise, Uslo aimed his weapon at her.

"Uslo!" Ley cried, clearly distressed. "What are you doing! She has done no crime that deserves death!"

"Watch your words, Ley," Uslo said with a snarl. "Or have you forgotten who is really in charge here? Now, drop your weapons."

"How did I know you would pull a cowardly stunt like this, Uslo?" Ley growled as he tossed his blades away, one of them landing by Zeno's body.

Uslo chuckled darkly. "Because you know I would take advantage of an opportunity if I saw one, Ley," he said, his weapon still pointed at Lila's head. "How convenient that your nephew decided to challenge you, only to fail. He will make the prefect scapegoat to take the blame for all your deaths."

"Whatâ€¦".

"Imagine the gossip!" Uslo continued. "Zeno challenges the kaidon, only to not only kill him but the elders as well in a bloody rage, forcing the captain of the guard to kill him and leave the position of kaidon wide open to anyone, namely meâ€¦".

"Have you no honor?" one of the elders growled. "A true Sangheili would not resort to tactics like this."

"And what is honor? What is a true Sangheili?" Uslo countered. "Before the Covenant, we fought amongst ourselves, leaving only the truly fit to live and pass on their genes. During the Covenant, we mostly only fought lesser races, weakening us as a whole. Now that we are free of the Covenant's shackles, we still have not returned to the true way of our species: I intend to change that, among other things."

"You fool," Lila growled, struggling against the warrior holding her.

"We have yet to recover from the wars we recently fought! Starting warfare between keeps will ruin us completely!"

"And we will rise from those ashes a better, stronger, species," Uslo snarled. "I do this, for the sake of our future and to do so; those still strongly tainted by the Covenant must be purged." He switched his aim to Ley. "Along with those that are abnormalâ€¦mentally."

Sani watched as Ley backed away, glaring at Ley, whom seemed to be enjoying this power trip a bit too well. Yet, Sani saw he kept briefly glancing at something else. He looked and his eyes widened: Zeno was moving! Had he been playing dead or was simply rendered unconscious? Was there something else going on here?

The __squad __leader__â€¦, Sani thought, realizing that if he saw Zeno moving, he would warn Uslo and Uslo would easily finish Zeno off. He had to act. Forgive __me, __Lila, __but __this __may __hurt __a __bit.__

He bunched his legs under him, doing this best to ignore the pain from the wound he received earlier. When he was certain he had aimed himself right, he propelled himself at the warrior. The impact knocked all three of them to the floor, both Lila and the squad leader giving out a startled yelp. It would have an effect that proved to be better than he hoped. Uslo, caught by surprise at the commotion, turned toward them.

"Now Zeno!" Ley called out. Uslo, his eyes now wide, started to spin around again, but proved to be for naught as the tip of a kisan was now protruding from his belly. The man gasped as the blade disappeared again, his weapon slipping from his hand. Zeno must have severed his spine, for his legs crumpled from underneath him and he fell to the floor. The bastard was still alive, but clearly paralyzed from the waist down.

"Captain!" the squad leader cried, trying to untangle himself from the pile they were in. Lila, however, was able to get a leg free enough to give him a nice kick in the head, stunning him. Sani rendered him fully unconscious with a solid head butt. Only now did Sani get a good look at Zeno and see just how close to death he truly was.

"Zenoâ€¦," Sani breathed as Zeno approached him, deactivating his borrowed kisan before embracing him. "I thought I had lost youâ€¦."

"Not yet, my sweetâ€¦," Zeno said softly as he cut his bonds. "Not yetâ€¦"

"Butâ€¦you should be deadâ€¦."

"I knowâ€¦butâ€¦you see, Ley had other plansâ€¦."

* * *

><p>Several minutes agoâ€¦._

Zeno coughed and gasped as the ability to breath suddenly returned to him. He fell onto his hands and knees, taking in long daunts of

sweet air. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Ley kneel down beside him. "Why?" he coughed. "Why didn't you kill me like you are supposed to?"_

"_Under normal circumstances I would, but these are not normal circumstancesâ€¦|."_

"_What are youâ€¦|."_

The conversation was interrupted by a guard bursting into the room. "Kaidon!" he cried. "Uslo approaches and he brings others!"

"_So the time has indeed come, as I suspectedâ€¦|," Ley muttered before addressing the guard directly. "Thank you; now go before he sees you." The guard saluted and left._

Zeno looked at him confused. "What is going on?" he asked.

"_As I alluded to before, there is more going on here than what you or Lila knowâ€¦|." For the first time, Zeno saw regret and sorrow in Ley's eyes. "And time is running out for us both."_

"_Whatâ€¦|what are you playing at, Ley?"_

"_I need you to play dead for me, Zeno and when the time is right, to strike Uslo down."_

"_Why should I pretend to be dead when by all rights I really should be? And why do you want 'me' to kill your pet?"_

"_Please, Zeno. I promise to explain everything, if I am able, when this is over. Iâ€¦|I know you have no reason to trust me at all, but just this onceâ€¦|just this onceâ€¦|trust me on this. It may be our only chance to set things right."_

Zeno was really confused. What was going on? Why the sudden change in Ley's attitude toward him? He knew though that unless he played along, he may never find out. Besides, what else did he have to lose? He was a dead man.

"_Alrightâ€¦|," Zeno said. "Your explanation had better be goodâ€¦|."_

"_Thank you, Zeno." Ley sounded genuinely grateful. "Noble elders," he said addressing said elders. "I ask you to play along as well. All will be explained, I promise you."_

_The elders nodded in agreement, curiosity in their eyes. _

* * *

><p>"You do not know how hard it was to keep up the act when I heard youâ€¦|," Zeno said softly. "Or when Uslo shot you."<p>

"I can imagine," Sani said, nuzzling him. "But you pulled it off."

"Yesâ€¦|I failed to win against Leyâ€¦|but at leastâ€¦|the _other_ problem has beenâ€¦|neutralized. Speaking of whichâ€¦|." At that, Zeno walked over to Uslo's prone form. Uslo was looking up at him

defiantly. "No one," Zeno growled. "And I mean _no_ one hurts my mate!" They watched as Zeno kicked and stomped Uslo a couple of times before raising his borrowed kisan for a killing blow.

"No, Zeno," Ley said suddenly. "I want him alive for now."

"Yes you better not kill me," Uslo said with a chuckle as Zeno backed off. "Ley knows what will happen if I die: a shame no Sangheili can bare."

"Do not be so sure of that, Uslo," Ley said softly. "I am not afraid of your threats anymore."

"Oh? And why is that?"

"Because I intend to tell everyone in this room my shame myself."

"What!" Uslo attempted to get to his feet, but of course failed miserably. "You can't!"

"Watch me!" Ley hissed.

"I take it this is part of this _explanation_ you promised?" Zeno asked, his curiosity piqued.

"Yes." Ley paced around a moment. His demeanor was nothing like the hateful blademaster Zeno grew up with. Instead, he looked confused, lost, and despondent. "Where to start?" Ley said softly. "I suppose the beginning." He turned toward Zeno. "Do you recall what the relation was between myself and your mother?"

"Siblings," Zeno replied. "Which is common knowledge."

"Not just siblings twins, like you and Lila. I..I have to wonder if all opposite gendered twins are usually cursed like we are."

At this Zeno scowled. "Being a _semo_ is not a _curse_," he spat.

"I am _not_ a _semo_!" Ley snapped. "I am something else."

"I do not see what else you _could_ be."

"There is no word in our language that describes what I am," he said. "I guess the best way to describe it is being born in the wrong body: my mind is female but my body." At that, Ley looked at his hands as if he was disgusted by them.

The revelation hit Zeno like a slap in the face. While most everyone else looked at each other confused, Zeno knew exactly what he was, thanks to his time with the humans. "You are a /transsexual\," he said.

"A what?" Ley looked at him confused, as did everyone else, including Uslo.

"As you said, there is no word for it in our language," Zeno explained. "However, the humans do:

/transsexual\".

"/Transsexual,\" Ley repeated. A look of relief flashed across his face, relief that was short lived. \"Regardless of what it is called it is a curse. I could never be what I truly wanted, a Gi'vea like my sister. I was stuck in the role of a male: to attempt to act otherwise would get me accused of being a _semo_. Yet I could never fully act like a male as I could never get myself to bed with another female. The very thought disgusted me.\" Ley sighed deeply.

\"Mea she was the only one that understood me. I loved her dearly for that, though I was also jealous of her, as she was _born_ correctly. Worse, we both fell in love with the same man\"

Zeno saw where this was going. \"Kou\"

Ley nodded. \"You do not know what it is like to see someone you love, be in love with someone other than you. I tried to be happy for my sister, but it constantly ate away at my mind, my sanity. It was not fair it was not fair. Mea and I started getting into arguments over it. Then the gods punished me by killing her in that building collapse taking away the only person that understood me.

\"I knew it hurt Kou too, for he came to me for comfort. I truly felt he felt something for me and I did not want to lose him\"

\"When he started focusing more attention on me, you started to get jealous again,\" Zeno said. \"You started putting me down, trying to make him believe I was not worth the trouble. Especially after the illness.\"

\"For the most part yes,\" Ley confirmed. \"But also due to when I found out you were attracted to males: I feared you were cursed as I was. I acted the way I did to try to cure you: a foolish notion I know considering I could not cure _myself._ And through it all, Kou never lost faith in you, even after that damning message from Yuteri. Everything I did only drove him further away from me and then he sacrificed his own life for you, taking him forever from my reach. Leaving me trapped, with no one that understand what I am going through. Then one day I made the biggest mistake of all\".

Zeno glanced down at Uslo, whom was remaining oddly quiet. \"You started to confide in this bastard\".

\"Yes, he came upon me in a moment of weakness about a year after I took the mantle of kaidon. I was desperate for someone to understand me and told him everything like a naïve fool. He used that against me, threatening to expose my sins and shame to everyone. The only way to keep him quiet was to let him do what he wanted and he rewarded me by treating me like a female like I always wanted\".

\"Essentially, making him kaidon by proxy.\"

\"Aye my sins have cost this keep greatly: I do not deserve the mantle of kaidon because of them.\" Ley's face hardened, his demeanor turning to the hardened blademaker Zeno was familiar with. \"But Uslo does not deserve it either!\" With a growl, Ley picked up one of his discarded kisans and stalked toward Uslo. \"I should have done this a

long time ago!"

"Ley! No!" Uslo cried, managing to flip onto his back. "Remember all the comfort I gave you!"

"That comfort is not worth the innocent blood you have and intended to spill in my name!" Without another word, Ley plunged the kisan into Uslo's chest. Uslo uttered a loud gasp and shuddered before finally laying still. Shaking, Ley stepped back a few paces before falling to his knees, true relief on his face. "It is overâ€¦it is finally overâ€¦."

Zeno watched him for a moment, wishing he could just leave him in peace. However, he knew he could not. "Not yetâ€¦Uslo likely has supporters that will retaliate: they will need to be dwelt with. Plus." Zeno tossed Ley his other kisan before picking up his own. "There is still the challenge."

"Zeno, no!" Sani protested, grabbing his arm. "In your conditionâ€¦."

"Even at peak condition I could not defeat him, Sani," Zeno said sadly. "And as long as the challenge stands, neither of us can leave this room until one of us falls." With a sigh he added. "And you know which of us is likely to fall. Forfeiting is not an option either."

"Zenoâ€¦."

"He is right," Ley said, his expression one of regret. "One of us must die. To be fair, I would rather not kill you, Zeno."

Zeno smiled weakly. "After what I learned a few moments agoâ€¦I am not keen on killing you either, Leyâ€¦not that I would be able to anyway."

"Never the less, the challenge must be completed," one of the elders said.

There was a moment of silence. Then Ley backed up to the other side of the pit, drawing his swords. "Then come, Zeno," he said. "Come at me one last time with all you have and I will ensure your death is one befitting a man of honor such as you."

Zeno sighed and looked at Sani, whom looked down at the ground in resignation, Lila putting a hand on his shoulder. "You do not have to stay here to watch this, Sani," Zeno offered, but Sani was already shaking his head.

"I am here, I may as well, not matter how much it will hurtâ€¦."

"I love you, Saniâ€¦," Zeno said, nuzzling his forehead. "You are the best thing that has ever happened to meâ€¦." He took his hand into his own. "I will always be with you."

"I knowâ€¦," Sani said, nuzzling his neck. "But I will still miss youâ€¦."

Zeno stepped back and away, not wanting to prolong this any more than necessary. He looked at Lila, whom nodded, tears in her eyes. With a

sigh of resignation he turned away from them and took up his position in the pit, his kisans slipping back into his hands. He wondered what the point of this was now, besides technicalities. The real threat was now dead and Ley was remorseful for his sins and likely to do what he could to make up for them. Not that it will help him any.

"Leyâ€|," he said, glancing back at Lila and Sani one last time. "Take care of them for me, pleaseâ€|." Ley simply nodded, an unreadable expression on his face, and beckoned for him.

With a deep breath, Zeno finally charged, igniting his blades as he did so, roaring a battle cry as the rush of wind stripped away his tears. Ley did not ignite his own swords until the last few seconds and everything seemed to go in slow motion at that point. Zeno's initial strikes were parried and he ducked under one of Ley's counters and blocked the other. The exchanged went one like this for a couple of minutes, but Zeno knew he was not going to last.

In his mind, Zeno imagined that he would be the victor and Sani wouldn't suffer the pain of watching him be slain before his eyes. In this fantasy, he saw an opening in Ley's defenses, a rookie mistake, and he took it, plunging his sword into his opponent's upper abdomen. Yet, he had left himself open as well and the pain that erupted in his side snapped out of his fantasy and back to reality.

Only to find that fantasy and reality were one and the same.

Zeno looked down at his sword and confirmed that it was indeed impaled into Ley's abdomen and one of Ley's swords was indeed piercing his side. However, his new wound was not mortal like Ley's was and in shock Zeno jumped back, both swords pulling out of their respective flesh. Confused, Zeno dropped his swords and caught Ley as he crumpled and laid him down on ground, too shocked to speak the question in his mind. Fortunately, Ley could read it in his eyes.

"Youâ€|you are youngâ€|," Ley explained. "And have peopleâ€|that love you." He coughed painfully. "Itâ€|It would be wrong of me to take a lifeâ€|that still has so much to live forâ€|to take you from them." Ley nodded in Lila and Sani's direction, whom were approaching. "You have a lifeâ€|I wish I could have hadâ€|."

"But you can still have that life!" Zeno said, finally finding his voice. "Now that you understand what you areâ€|."

Ley shook his head, but was smiling. "My sinsâ€|would have haunted me for the rest of my natural life, Zeno. Better for me to step asideâ€|and let another more worthy to take my place. If I couldâ€|I would have taken back all the wrongs I haveâ€|committed."

"Leyâ€|."

"Shhâ€|there isâ€|more to tell you, before I passâ€|." Ley was having difficulty talking now and was starting to gasp for breath. "The oneâ€|that rescued your sisterâ€|andâ€|had been delivering supplies to the Gi'veaâ€|thatâ€|that was meâ€|."

"Whatâ€|," Lila said, shocked. "But then that also

meansâ€|. "

"Yesâ€|I was the one that found those plansâ€|and passedâ€|them on to you, to give to Zeno." Another cough, a more painful one this time. "All to give him the best chanceâ€|of succeeding."

"The fightâ€|you were just testing me. You never intended to kill me at allâ€|you wanted me to succeedâ€|," Zeno said softly, tears starting to form in his own eyes.

"Yesâ€|to make up for all the wrongs Iâ€|have doneâ€|." Ley reached up and touched Zeno's face. "You have a good heart, Zenoâ€|do not lose itâ€|but also do not lose that fireâ€|you use to protect what is important to you. Youâ€|have the potentialâ€|to be a great kaidonâ€|one Kou would be proud of."

"If it is the elders wish that I be kaidon, then I will perform to the best of my ability and right the wrongs that have been made."

"As I knowâ€|you would. I haveâ€|one thing to ask youâ€|Zeno."

"What is that, Ley?"

"Can youâ€|.forgive me?"

"Yes," Zeno said confidently. "Yes I do."

Ley's face was one of peace and relief and he sighed happily as he said in a whisper. "Thank you...For the first timeâ€|I feel at peaceâ€|how wonderfulâ€|..itâ€|..feelsâ€|" His hand slipped from Zeno's face and his eyes closed, a blissful smile on his face. The kaidon was dead.

And Zeno mourned him.

* * *

><p>AN: **See you next week for the epilogue and the commentary :)

11. Epilogue

_**Authors **__**Note: **_Thanks to Gex-1539 for proofing this.

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><p>Epilogue

Several days laterâ€|

Zeno walked out onto the balcony and looked out over the keep, seeing his fellow Ribals starting their daily routines. In the distant fields, he could see groups of brown specks of the agyat being set

out to pasture. Briefly, he thought he could smell the scent of the market, a scent that was ripped away as quickly as it came by the strong winds at this height. Strong and cold winds, making Zeno gather his cloak around himself tighter.

His kaidon cloak.

It turned out the elders did not object to him becoming kaidon: he did defeat Ley in the challenge after all, even if Ley did throw the match in Zeno's favor. The elders did try to delay the announcement of his new status for a few days though, to give him a chance to recover a bit from his injuries. Not that it worked: someone snitched and everyone in the keep knew within a day, forcing him to make an appearance so the keep could see their new kaidon. Zeno wished it had been under better circumstances, with how much of his person was covered in bandages and healing gel: he looked more like a Sangheili zombie than a living kaidon—or would that be a mummy? Human mythology still confused him in some areas. Regardless, the populous seemed to receive him well.

He smiled, briefly, at the irony of it all. Long ago, he wondered what it would be like to be kaidon, only to shoot the very idea down as quickly as it appeared. The __story __of __my __life,__ he realized. Everything he said would never happen, had happened. His doubt he would be seen as worthy to his people, the doubt he would become SpecOps, the doubt he would find love again after Miko's death. And now he was kaidon as well. Must __be __the __gods __idea __of __a __joke,__ he thought, chuckling.

His mind turned to more somber things, remembering Ley. If he hadn't met the people he had, if he didn't get the love and support he did throughout his life, he probably would have suffered a similar fate as him: dead and forgotten, name stricken from the keeps memory. But __I __will __not __forget __you,__ Zeno thought. I __would __not __be __here __today __if __it __were __not __for __you.__ Over the last few days, Zeno wondered over this. How much of his life would have been different if Ley took a different path? He could safely guess a number of things that would be different. Not that it mattered, as what has been done has been done and now he had to the power to correct the wrongs and mistakes Ley and Uslo made.

The first thing he did was free all the innocents that Uslo locked up in the keep dungeon: Herdmaster Koro was very happy to see that he had succeeded. Then he ordered that blockade around the Hilvum keep to end. It turned out the Hilvums, not having been happy about having one of their own captured, had been gradually picking away at the line, capturing many Ribals. They happily turned over their prisoners once they heard that Zeno was now in charge of the keep. As a bonus, many of the prisoners ended up being some of Uslo's staunchest supporters and Zeno 'took care' of them. The last thing on his immediate priority list was to end the house arrest on the Gi'vea and the Gi'vea were grateful to be able to go out into the sun again.

These acts helped cement a positive image of him in the minds of his people, a good first step in repairing all the damage that had been done. Still, Zeno knew his life as kaidon would not be easy. A number of Uslo's men were still out there: a couple already tried to avenge him, only to lose their lives to either Zeno's blade or Sani's skill with a gun. The rest were in hiding and it will take time to route

them out. Not to mention the High Council will likely blow a gasket when they find out he is kaidon now, only this time, they cannot do anything about it.

Granted, other keeps may test him. He wouldn't be surprised if the Kemots came knocking one day with an army, considering how they felt about semos: he was certain they would remember the 'one that got away'. At least he had the Hilvums as friends and he planned to officially make them allies to his keep. There was also the matter of repairing relations with allegiances they already had.

"Will you come inside before someone snipes your head off."

Zeno chuckled as he turned toward Sani, whom was standing at the threshold with his hands on his hips. "From this distance?" he retorted playfully. "I doubt that."

"I could," Sani boasted.

"Mmmâ€¦good thing you are on my side then," Zeno said as he walked up to him and embraced him. "Unlessâ€¦you plan to kill me yourselfâ€¦."

"Fehâ€¦if I kill you, it will be with love, not plasma."

"Well I would not mind going out that way at all."

Sani shook his head. "You are kaidon of the keep and you still joke around."

"Well someone has to have a sense of humor around here," Zeno said with a flourish. "Those eldersâ€¦I think they were born without a humerusâ€¦."

"Your jokes are getting worseâ€¦." Sani looked him up and down. "And so is your appearance."

"Hey, some people dig scars," Zeno said with a sniff.

"Yeah? Well, they cannot have you." Sani wrapped his arms around him possessively. "You are mine."

"Yes and you are mine as a wellâ€¦." Zeno took his hands into his own. "Forever."

"Forever," Sani echoed, then added in cheekily. "Unless you intend try to get yourself killed without telling me first."

"Still sore over the Koni thing?"

"Mmmâ€¦you are still on probation."

"Oh come onâ€¦please do not make me sleep on the floor again. Do you know how uncomfortable that was? Besidesâ€¦that is soâ€¦unkaidonâ€¦ish."

Sani burst out laughing. "I am just kidding, love."

"Sheeshâ€¦I need to get my pants backâ€¦I am the kaidon here."

"But I like you _without_ pantsâ€|."

"That was metaphorical!"

"And I am being literalâ€|."

Zeno lowered his head and said in a whisper. "Are you trying to seduce me?"

"Wellâ€|it _has_ been a whileâ€|," Sani said huskily.

"Perhaps because you kept me under punishment."

"Hmmmâ€|then I will have to revise how I punish you."

"In what way?"

"Mmmm perhaps demanding it multiple times a day?"

Zeno blinked at him and then laughed. "If that is the case, who cares if I keel over from 'punishment'â€|I will die _happy!_"

~ Fin

* * *

><p>AN:** Commentary next!

12. Commentary

****Warning! The following is commentary about the creation of the **_**Zendou**_** series and will likely have spoilers! If you haven't read any of the other parts of the series, I highly suggest you do so before reading this commentary (though I will understand if you didn't read two of them due to the M rating)!****

Whew! Another long haul finally finished (series was a total of 73 chapters overall. Yikes!). Hard to believe I started working on this series way back in early '09...Time sure flies doesn't it? Oh, where to start?

Well, originally, I was planning on the series being one big fic titled ****Worth, Purpose, Destiny****. At the time, as I was putting everything together, I was struggling with how to structure it. I knew I wanted to go through Zeno's entire background and beyond, but write it chronologically or in post-Halo 3 with flashbacks?

Around the same time, I realized that I just could not do a big marathon fic like ****Chains of the Past ****again. I hated it when during ****Chains of the Past**** I would get writers block and risk having a delay in posting. Granted at that time I ensured I had a few chaps worth of 'buffer', but this time I did not want to risk having an update delay during the story itself. So I not only decided to break up the story into several parts, but write out each part completely before starting to post it. When that decision was made, I realized that the title ****Worth, Purpose, Destiny ****was a bit long and clunky to use as a main title if I hoped to have a subtitle for each part.

So the search was on for a new, overall title for the new series. I started looking at synonyms for the three words in the original title and eventually found _virtue_, the definition of which fit the overall theme of the series. However, just using _Virtue_ as a title was rather plain—and using something like _Path of Virtue_ was a bit clique: I wanted something a bit more unique. Thus I started going into foreign languages, particularly Japanese (Trivia bit: I use bits from Japanese words frequently when making up words for 'alien' language, along with other languages like Swahili). I came across _Zendou_, which in Japanese had definitions like 'Path of Virtue', 'Righteousness', proper guidance. It fit (and that the word was very similar to 'Zeno' was a happy coincidence), so a new title had been found.

About the same time I resolved the other problem I had: how to write it. While writing out the overall plotline in chronological order in an outline (which I usually don't do, if you remember my commentary from ****Chains of the Past****) I realized I did not really have much material to work with for Zeno's childhood and what I did have would serve best as a flashback. At the same time, I had a lot of material for Zeno's early adult life, which was not suitable to write as flashbacks. So I essentially combined the two ideas: started with a young adult Zeno with flashbacks of his childhood mixed in to a chronological storyline. Thus the first story arc of the series, ****Zendou: Isolation****, started to take shape.

****Plots****

****Zendou: Isolation**** did not go through too many revisions plotline wise as I was putting it together. Really the only major revisions was how Zeno meets up with the SpecOps team and what went on in the lab itself. For the first one, Zeno actually hears the dropship that dropped off the SpecOps team and sees it as it leaves. It was Justal (just dubbed 'Pokromee then) that found him—and yes he was just as much of an ass toward him then as he was in the actual fic. The other difference in that particular scene was that Rtas was in the squad instead of Miko: I changed that bit to give Miko more character development time and to give Zeno someone that would be more likely to rescue him from the human hunter team.

The lab scene had a few changes to it as well (though how Zeno got there is the same). Originally, the humans did not know what to do with their new Elite prisoner and the commander and head scientist actually argue about it while Zeno is listening in (I do not recall, however, if he actually could understand them or not in this version). He was actually put in a cell for a bit, before going through the 'being stripped and strapped to a table and force fed' routine. Other than that, everything else is the same as what I originally plotted. Only thing I would like to change is the description of the lab room itself so the equipment/storage room where Zeno gets his stuff back is on the opposite side of the room: it just makes no damn sense to me now that the lady walks right by a lab table that should have had an Elite strapped in it and _not_ notice (maybe I can blame it on her texting and walking at the same time? har har)!

OK, I am going to spill to beans on something. Some of you probably guessed what that lab was for, (the name 'OPERATION: PESTILANCE' is kind of a big ass clue, ya know?), but I'll confirm it anyway since I don't plan on doing any stories around that. Yes, that base was ONI

run and they were running a biological weapon research facility. Yep, they needed a live Elite to take samples and run tests on for it: good thing Zeno broke out eh? In that memo at the end of ****Isolation**** I even put in a little easter egg that was related to both the memo and real world events at the time and no one caught it_ (or at least, no one that admitted to seeing it that is). No, I am not going to spill the beans on what it was either. :P Anyway, onwardâ€¦|.

****Zendou: Acceptance**** had only one major change to it from my original plot line and it was a whopper. Originally, the mission Zeno and Miko go into that finally gets Zeno to accept his feelings for Miko was to explore this labyrinth that turned out to be not only full of various traps but controlled by a rampant human AI. Now that I think of it, this might have been influenced from watching my brother play Portal. Anyway. I had a few different versions of this idea (mostly around whether they had other SpecOps with them or if they were searching for a squad they lost contact with), but the traps went from medieval style (spikes and whatnot) to more 'modern' (such as lasers): I even had the classic 'large boulder rolling down a hallway at them' thing ala Indiana Jones. Hell, I was even entertaining the thought that they were forced to fight this huge mechanical dragon at the end in order to escape (I can see your 'wat' faces right now ;)) and it was going to be the original means Miko got his massive scar.

Yeah, it was silly (shows that I am not immune to having really stupid ideas) and I scrapped it for a number of reasons. One of the big ones was that it would have taken a bunch of chapters to do it justice and I felt the story should focus more on Zeno and Miko's developing relationship (rather than, OMG there's a huge boulder coming at us!). The other main reason was that I just could not justify why the humans would have built such a place (besides a clique mad scientist type), only to abandon it and leave the AI behind (which would have been against Cole Protocol). Courseâ€¦|the AI could have been the reason the humans were all goneâ€¦| (again, possible Portal influence). Lastly, the whole scenario would have felt like Zeno/Miko had been transported to another genre rather than staying within the HaloVerse. So, yeah, this idea was best suited to never have been graced on paper (digital or otherwise) and yay to me for going with the 'hidden innie outpost' idea instead.

****Zendou: Trials**** I really don't have much to say about, besides using it to start showing Zeno's darker side and a few other things. Namely how Zeno deals with Yuteri and Juwi (really, Zeno was not a very good boy here), but also the depth of the relationship between Zeno/Miko and Zeno/Rtas/Anko (you know that if anyone else had bitchslapped him, Rtas likely would have put a sword in their belly). Yeah, not much to say about this one at allâ€¦|moving onâ€¦|.

****Zendou: Revelations**** had a lot of stuff going on. You had the Schism, Miko's death, the Sangheili/human alliance, oh my. It was also the first chance to properly show off the Gi'vea, my caste of all female Sangheili that are the female equivalent of the swordsmen and do a little foreshadowing of what was to come later in ****Untold Truths****. I did have some timeline trouble that ended up with me needing to rewrite parts of some scenes (the perspective switching between MC and Arby in Halo 2 can really screw up your perception of how much time has passed) and I still feel I got it a bit wrong for

the period when Zeno is on Earth post-Halo 2 through to the end of Halo 3. What didn't help was that I wanted to avoid Zeno going into situations that were in the actual games (e.g. Arbiter/Tartus boss battle).

Unfortunately there were a few scene ideas that didn't make it in, either due to not finding a way to fit it in or just plain forgot about it while trying to finish the darn thing. Two of them were humorous in nature, which likely would not have fit the overall theme of the fic anyway, but would be good material for my ****Misfortunate Events**** shorts, or putting them into a kind of _lost chapters_ type fic for the series as a whole. One dealt with a cat and the other the dentist, for those curious. There is a third scene I really did mean to put into the fic, but it never made it in: ever wonder what Zeno was force feed way back in ****Isolation****? Yeah, that's what that scene was about: it's going to be another _lost chapters_ type thing most likely.

This fic also gave me the opportunity to explore how Rtas took over a cruiser in Halo 2 although now new info seems to suggest Rtas didn't just take back a cruiser but an _entire fleet_ (that's from the _Essential Visual Guide_ btw)! Rtas why do you have to be so badass? :P His new responsibilities though gave me the perfect opportunity to show how Zeno and Rtas' start to grow apart and ultimately lead to Zeno ending up as Ambassador, stationed on Earth. I will say one thing: I hated trying to write an emo Zeno. Unfortunately, the next fic had a bit of emo Zeno as well.

With ****Zendou: Duel Hearts**** I wanted to do a bit different from the rest. While the past story arcs were completely in Zeno's PoV, I wanted another PoV in this one: Sani's, as it was Sani's story as much as it was Zeno's. I also wanted to try my hand at writing a bit of symbolism, using Zeno's nightmares. Each 'room' was symbolic of one of the things that kept Zeno from moving on from Miko's death. I tried to use color meanings as well for each room, but that turned out to be a bit problematic as colors means different things to different cultures, so finding a color that meant what I wanted was tricky. So here is clarification for those that may be confused: Mr. Blob was sorrow (blue), the weight room was guilt (green) and the armored asshole room was pride (purple) and fear (black). Also, for clarifications sake, the child in the last room represents Sani.

In terms of plotline, the only major revision was the fight between Zeno and Runi and a bit of the aftermath. Sani still escaped his bonds, but in this version went all the way to Zeno's home for shelter (in that version they were taking it much slower). After Zeno took him to the hospital for treatment, he went and hunted down Runi and beat his ass in a bar. Rtas was still one of the ones that tried to stop him, only he succeeded without Sani's help (And in one version, Chief was there as well, but that was struck out long before I decided _Zendou_ should be as close to canon as I could make it).

I went against this scenario because I felt it would be better if Zeno did not have full 'control' over his actions. In the original scenario, Zeno had time to cool down and think about what he wanted to do, in contrast with what is in the actual fic where his anger goes out of control and he goes into MUST KILL NOW mode. This also added the tension where Zeno is so far gone into his rage that Rtas cannot bring him out of it alone, thus giving Sani an additional role

for the scene. In regard to the aftermath, the only real difference after the fight is that Rtas actually had Zeno put in jail until the hearing.

I also intended for Zeno to bitch Rtas out for 'abandoning him' in his time of need right after the fight (when Rtas tries to imprison Zeno like in the original version, only Zeno refuses to go along with it), but Zeno decided to give Rtas the 'puppy dog eyes' pleading look instead when writing the scene. It is a scene that needs to happen at some pointâ€|not sure how or when now though.

****Zendou: Untold Truths**** Oh boyâ€|of the story arcs, this one had the most revising from the original outline. Originally, the Sangheili that became kaidon after Kou passed (whom, if I remember right, I just had him die of natural causes here) was a bully from Zeno's past named Vini. Vini got the position through 'suspicious' means and attempted to get Zeno killed through hired mercs. Zeno survived the attempt unscathed, but Sani was badly injured, forcing Zeno to go after the 'source' himself. He does kill Vini and become kaidon himself.

There were big problems with Vini though: he was terribly clichÃ©, decidedly unSangheili and someone Zeno would easily beat in the end. I wanted none of that as the series developed, so Vini got scrapped and Ley got the 'job' instead (though Vini still made it into the series itself by being reincarnated as Zeno's childhood friend). Ley initially had problems of his own with being a bit clichÃ©, but I'll go into more details with him later.

Initially, both Lila and Sani go with Zeno to the Ribal keep, posing as a couple. They stayed at an 'inn' to provide a place for Zeno to stay in 'safely' at night, while Zeno went about in active camo much like he did in the final version. While Zeno was out, Uslo (Ley originally), though at the time he wasn't named, came in and basically wanted Lila. He forces Sani and Lila to mate to 'prove' their relationship. After this, Zeno tells them to leave the keep for their own safety (but get caught on the way out). I ultimately decided that those two going with Zeno initially would not make sense considering how Zeno needed to do his recon in secret in order to have a chance.

The big fight scene between Zeno and Ley I had many ideas for and it was hard to decide which one to go with. The original idea was Zeno beats Ley flat out and demanded explanation for his treatment before allowing Ley to take his own life (Uslo didn't exist in this version). In another, it happened the same way as the previous, only Uslo comes in right after Zeno take the mantle of kaidon: he tries to attack both the elders and Zeno before Zeno kills him. I had a version where Sani is somewhere up high and it was he that kills Uslo. Ultimately, I decided that Zeno should technically 'lose' the fight, but is spared because Ley needed his help to take care of a bigger problem (Uslo) and 'allows' Zeno to kill him afterward.

Characters****

****Zeno 'Ribal****

Originally I intended Zeno to just be a minor character, however (and obviously), that quickly turned out not to be the case. Almost

immediately an interesting back story started developing around him and I felt compelled to write it. That he was first true non-hetero character also added to the interest and the challenge (though by this time Sani and Runi were also starting to develop that way, though whether this was due to Zeno's sudden appearance or otherwise I no longer remember).

It was a bit difficult to write Zeno at the start, considering he already somewhat had an established personality, especially with the 'not accepting of his homosexuality' angle. I basically had to write him as if he was brand new character and hope he turned out the same as he was in ****Chains of the Past**** and various ****Misfortunate Events**** shorts. I think it is obvious that I was not completely successful in that regard: Zeno turned out not quite as 'happy-go-lucky' or prank prone. Basically, he 'grew up' and I think he is an overall better character for it.

****Sani 'Hilvum****

Like Zeno, Sani was also supposed to be just a minor character, but soon after Zeno came along I got this idea that these two would end up in love with each other. However by this time, I was already hinting at a relationship between Sani and Runi, so I need to find out some way to rectify that. Fortunately, Runi was starting to turn into a bit of an ass on his own, so I used that to my advantage. The biggest challenge while writing ****Duel Hearts**** was ensuring he and Zeno did not jump into bed together so quickly, since they were already so well established as a pair in my head.

Sani has always been a bit on the submissive and timid side (though he was decidedly less so during ****Warrior's Agenda****). I decided to take the opportunity to create the rather unique keep history that I doubt may would have expected from Sangheili culture, and thus explain much of Sani's character in the process. I've always felt that Sangheili culture can vary somewhat between regions, if not between keeps themselves and the Hilvums were a perfect opportunity to see just how different I can make them.

****Miko 'Kemotee****

I will admit one thing: it can be hard to be motivated to develop a character when you already know he is going to die. Miko was a prime example of this, especially while I was still figuring out how to structure the series. Once that was figured out though, he came together fairly quickly.

There was an interesting role reversal between Miko and Zeno while putting the series together. Initially, it was going to be Miko that was sympathetic toward the Brutes while Zeno hated them and Zeno that was sympathetic toward humans and Miko loathed humans. While working on ****Isolation****, I realized the sympathy for humans part of Zeno didn't make sense considering what he goes through, so I switched things around (though Zeno never completely reverted to the outright hate he had for the Brutes initially like he was supposed to after Miko's death).

****Luke McGuire****

When it came time to write the part of Zeno's life where he had to start working with humans, I needed a human for him to interact with.

I would have used Johnson, but he was just not 'available' timeline wise for it to work, thus Luke McGuire was born. He did turn out largely as I intended: young, smart, somewhat cheeky ONI officer that knew how to put Zeno in his place verbally and someone Zeno eventually values as a friend. Luke does not show up much after ****Revelations**** mainly due to there being no 'reason' for him to, beyond a few key points.

****Ley 'Ribalai****

Of the characters, Ley went through the most changes while developing the series. Originally, he was a friend to Kou serving as an assistant of sorts and his relation to Mea only hinted at. He wasn't a blademaster, nor did he have any kind problem with Zeno. When Vini got scrapped as the main antagonist for ****Untold Truths****, Ley became the next logical choice, seeing he was Zeno's original teacher/mentor. Ley now developed a distain for the child that should have been allowed to die as was the custom, but not only lived and was now useless in terms of continuing the bloodline, but seen as weak and unworthy. Someone that would do what it took to have the current kaidon removed for moving away from the Path and take the mantle for himself. Yet this was a bit cliché in of itself.

So I decided to go deeper into Ley's persona. By then I had already decided that Ley and Mea were twins themselves and in the original prologue of the series, Ley was actively concerned about Kou's image, almost to the point of affection. I decided to use that and made it so Ley desired Kou, but could not have him due to his twin being married to him (and Kou not being homosexual). Love that became a jealous rage, a 'if I can't have him, no one will!' situation.

As the series was being writing I had a slight problem with this though: I had already established that one of the reasons Ley hated Zeno so much was because Zeno was homosexual. Having Ley desire Kou in such a way would be hypocritical, so I decided to twist things a bit. I made Ley a transsexual, a female trapped in a male's body. This, along with the inclusion of Uslo blackmailing him, turned Ley into an atypical antagonist: someone that made a ton of mistakes in life and regrets them all and desires to make amends for his sins.

****Runi 'Goturn****

Technically Runi is still a minor character, though he did go through a transformation process while developing the series. Turning him into a controlling ass was not as difficult as I thought, especially once I figured out the exact reason for it. He does have a bit of an interesting history himself, some of which I was not originally going to reveal (namely why he fled his keep). The cat's out of the bag in that regard, though not all details about that incident have been revealed yet. There is also a deeper reason why Runi has acted the way he did, but that won't be revealed just yet.

****Sesai****

I originally designed her as whim and 'what if', should I ever end up needing an AI character of my own. When I decided that ****Zendou**** would be written as close to official canon as I can make it, (thus Cortana and Chief would not be there for the later parts of the series), that opened the door for her. I originally intended for her

and Zeno to have a more fleshed out relationship, mainly more barbs being thrown at each other in a playful manner, but that just didn't happen over the course of writing ****Duel Hearts****. I also did not get to show 'why' she named herself as she did: Sesai in Japanese means 'wordly and/or practical wisdom'.

****Uslo 'Ribal****

He was a late addition to the cast and unfortunately he did not get as much character development as I'd liked before he was killed off. Unfortunately, he did kind of end up being a clich  antagonist I was trying to avoid.

****Juwi 'Hagumee****

I made him simply for someone for Miko/Zeno to bounce off of and to cause conflict. Don't think you've seen the last of this asshole though, for he has one last part to play |.

****A word about Beta-readers****

Having a beta (or two or more, if you desire) is must when writing with intent to post anywhere. Not only would a beta's corrections help you avoid embarrassing mistakes (I have made several dozes that would have really confused the readers over the series), but a really good beta will help you actually improve. So this part is for beta-readers as well.

A good beta should not only correct your mistakes, but tell you why it is wrong. Certain grammar rules can be forgotten if you do not use them regularly (if they are taught at all |) and in some cases the rules can be different between different regions/countries (e.g. Do you put punctuation before or after the ending quotation marks? I was taught before |but apparently in some places it is taught to put it after |.)). So a beta that is familiar with different variations in the rules is a plus.

Now, some betas are good at some things and not at others, so you need to keep in mind what you actually need in a beta. I went through two betas for the Zendou series: the first, while he was better at the grammar thing than me, had more of an eye for plot, while my second was a grammar/spelling king. I likely would have kept the first around, but we had a major falling out. I won't go into details, but the experience does lead credence to another tip in regards to beta-readers: if the beta has an attitude and basically looks down upon you, you probably should find another beta. The 'holier-than-art-thou' bit does not help anyone when it comes to betaing.

That said, the beta   has to show some respect as well. In my opinion, a beta-reader is there to not only to correct your work, but to help you avoid making the same mistakes again. So don't just copy/paste the corrections and ignore why they were made in the first place! That just annoys your beta-reader: a happy a beta-reader is one whom ends up needing to correct less and less as the story goes on. I know my current beta is very happy with how much I have improved grammar wise since I started Zendou.

That said, as a beta  , you need to be open to crits, whether it is on grammar/plot/whatever. Don't be one of those immature brats that

throws your hands up in the air and throws a fit when someone tries to give you helpful advice on how to improve (provided that is, said criticism is not rude and consensuing: that doesn't help anyone either). If a beta-reader tells you that your plot needs a lot of work, it likely does: same if your are told a character is a blatant Mary-sue and should be adjusted.

That's not to say the beta-reader is always right as they are human too, so don't feel obligated to change something just because one says to. Think it over and carefully weigh the suggestion against your original idea. If one works better over the other with the plot, use that one (or in some cases, a combination of both will be best). You as the author, have the final say in what stays and goes: after all, you are the one writing it!

A final note

Well that's all I have, though I've likely forgot some things *wishes she would start working on commentary while writing the storiesâ€|. Hopefully this gave you an insight on how I work. Don't be afraid to ask me questions! In fact, I am going to ask 'you' questions *evil grin*.

Likeâ€|what was your favorite arc/scene? Who was your favorite character? Curious Kia is curious ;).

Oh and before anyone asks: I have no idea when my next full length fic will be posted. I have four ideas which are competing for attention and my writing drive on top of that is rather dead. When I do know what fic will be posted next, I'll put up a journal on my DA page (which is linked as my homepage in my profile, in case anybody didn't know). And yes, Glasslands did kind of mess things up canon wise for me: No High Council anymore...do'h! No actual 'capital'? Double DO'H. The latter one being a more stumbling block for my future fics...but I have an idea to work around that...

That's all I have to say now (save for answering any questions). I hope you enjoyed the series! *wave*

End
file.